Original Article

An empirical comparison of online advertising in four countries: Cultural characteristics and creative strategies

Received (in revised form): 16th September 2010

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to examine how cultural characteristics are reflected in the construction and content of online banner ads, based on the models of culture difference proposed by Hofstede, Hall, and Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner. The study examines the styles of creative variables, executional and information cues and cultural factors through a comparison of the banner ads employed in four countries: China, Japan, Korea and the United States. Findings indicate that culture does influence creative strategies: different executional strategy factors were employed by each of the four countries. Results suggest that cross-cultural marketers and advertisers should recognize the benefits that exploiting cultural difference can provide.

Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing (2010) 18, 253–261. doi:10.1057/jt.2010.18

Keywords: international advertising; banner advertising; executional strategy; creative factors; information cues; cultural value

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and technology have combined to create a target marketplace mediated through the Internet which is truly international in scope. In response to this, multinational enterprises have had to adapt their communication strategies to accommodate culturally-appropriate banner ads.

Although a website's attractiveness is influenced by cultural determinants,¹ multinational enterprises can develop culturally sensitive sites and banner ads that can nevertheless successfully utilize global online market trends.² Hofstede,^{3,4} Hall,^{5,6} and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner⁷ have suggested several cultural differences that

communicators should note to ensure that their messages are more effective. This study examines how the construction and content of banner ads reflect specific social values based on the models of culture difference proposed by these authors. Specifically, the study examines the use of creative variables, executional and information cues and cultural factors across brand advertisements and various products.

The main objectives of this article are twofold: (1) to identify the different creative variables, executional and cultural factors used in the banner ads developed for the consumer markets in China, Japan, Korea and US and (2) to suggest alternative ad designs and a global internet advertising strategy for international advertising scholars and practitioners based on the analysis developed, noting in doing so the various tools

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that can be used for building effective banner ad formats on the Internet.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

Onkvisit and Shaw¹ identified the Internet as an international medium and argue that it is uniquely influential. Although Internet shopping is a global behaviour, purchasing habits and determinants of website attractiveness remain culturally bound. The recognition of cultural norms and value systems embraces all aspects of an international firm's operations. As cultural characteristics significantly influence the thoughts and behaviors of individuals, it is important to understand how cultural difference is expressed according to social values.⁸ Culture is a difficult concept to define, and many definitions exist that apply to particular scholarly studies. Culture influences our behavior in subtle ways.⁹ Kluckhohn¹⁰ defined culture as 'consist[ing] of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts' (p.73). Previous research in this field has been focused on Hofstede's, Hall's, and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's cultural dimensions. Many cultural studies have explored the culturally embedded approaches individuals use to interact with one another and to make decisions. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner⁷ emphasize paths taken to solve marketing and management challenges and assert that different cultures take different routes to solve similar problems.¹¹

Trends in global advertising strategy

As far as advertising communication strategies for the Internet are concerned, some authors have emphasized that locally embedding a website is critical to business success. Although an e-commerce site is the result of a convergent trend of standardization in web communication and content, the website should also be culturally sensitive in its thematic appearance, interactivity and content. Cyr and Trevor-Smith¹² suggest that localization is the process of adapting a product or service to a particular language, culture and

desired local 'look-and-feel' (p.3). For a website to be a local success, subtle cultural and cross-cultural communication issues need to be considered.¹³ Nevertheless, Lo and Gong¹⁴ point out that successful global communications through websites exist in a rapidly evolving equilibrium.

Hypotheses

In a modern society, advertising performs socio-cultural functions that reflect and create social awareness, values and ideologies as well as economic functions that provide information and persuade consumers to themselves promote products and services.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

Research on mechanical and design factors in advertisements have been conducted mainly by focusing on the effectiveness of these factors.¹⁸⁻²⁰ Taylor²¹ points out that many studies have focused on examining usage of and the preference for the typology of executional factors developed by Stewart and Furse.^{22,23} Keeping pace with the remarkably fast and complex development of the Internet, online advertising is similarly fast-growing with its own unique characteristics, such as interactivity. However, there have been few studies on the executional differences between banner ads from different countries. There may be diverse executional factors among the four countries in this study that can be estimated by using the findings from studies on traditional advertising media, thereby leading to the first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: There is significant difference in executional factors amongst banner ads across different countries

A cross-cultural empirical study could find significant differences in advertising informativeness. In particular, many studies applying Resnik and Stern's classification system²⁴ have supported the notion that there are significant differences in the use of information cues. After applying Resnik and Stern's system,²⁵ Okazaki and Alonso²⁶ concluded that information cues contained important differences when comparing websites from Japan, Spain, and the United States. Resnik

and Stern's classification system²⁷ can be employed to find differences in levels of communication for four countries. The second hypothesis is related to finding information differences in banner ads across four countries:

Hypothesis 2: There are significant differences in information cues exhibited by banner ads across different countries.

Frazer²⁸ argues that a creative strategy can be used to classify advertising messages into general natural and characteristics. De Mooij¹⁵ suggested the following eight classifications that could be used to identify how advertising is culture-specific: announcement, display, association, transfer, lesson, drama, entertainment, imagination and special effect. Simon² mentions that creative strategy has proved to be the most objective and explanative classification, within which the classified items are: information, psychographic appeal, repeated assertion, command, brand familiarization, symbolic association, imitation, obligation and habit starting. The following hypothesis was formed to account for these creative strategy factors.

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant difference in creative strategies employed for the development of banner ads across different countries.

Cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede,^{3,4} Hall,^{5,6} Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner,⁷ and Hall and Hall²⁹ have been used to understand cultural characteristics by nation. The traditional typology of cultural dimensions has been applied to a number of cross-cultural studies using traditional advertising media. Also, the typology of cultural dimensions can be used with the online environment for advertisements such as banners with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the cultural differences found in those advertisements. These observations lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Hofstede's, Hall's, and Trompenaars-Hampden Turner's cultural typology dimensions are reliable predictors of the observed differences in banner ads.

Oh *et al*³⁰ and Simon² also classified creative strategies as either subliminally-oriented strategies or conscious-oriented strategies. A subliminally-oriented strategy provides a means of appealing to the unconscious portion of the mind in an attempt to implant the message without exposing the selling intention. In contrast, a conscious-oriented strategy is a technique that appeals to the conscious and reasoning portion of the mind in an attempt explicitly to deliver the message of the selling intention.³⁰ Oh *et al*³⁰ propose that US web ads use more subliminally-oriented creative strategies than Korean web ads, and that Korean banner ads use a higher frequency of conscious-oriented strategies than US banner ads. This rationale generates the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: There is a significant difference in conscious-oriented and subliminally-oriented appeals amongst banner ads across different countries.

RESEARCH METHODS

Content analysis has been recognized as a useful technique for analyzing the volumes of data on banner ads as well as for identifying cross-cultural differences in banner ads on the Internet. This study employs this approach.

Data collection and the unit of analysis

Banner ads in four countries were compared and analyzed by looking at executional factors, creative factors, information cues and cultural values. The banner ads selected were employed in four countries from 2006 to 2008. Data about the banner ads, such as each individual banner's creative treatment and the number of banner ads placed online in the given number of days (500/568) for four countries were obtained from Advertising RAM (a Korean Internet research company). Banner ads for four countries were randomly selected with the SPSS random data selection technique and analyzed. The banner ads chosen belonged to common, multinational brands from the top 10 ranked Websites in China ($n = 305$), Japan ($n = 305$), Korea ($n = 305$) and

the United States ($n=305$), and were selected on the basis of specific characteristics or qualities.

The banner advertisements of four countries were examined to determine whether there were differences in the executional factors, creative strategies, information cues and cultural values of advertisements among four countries. Other banner ad variables analyzed included textual information, video, audio and animation.

Typology development for banner ads

The classification systems for executional factors, creative factors, information cues and cultural values were derived by adapting several previously used typologies. Kim and Leckenby²⁴ suggest that the typology should be identified as a set of mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories³¹ that reflect the nature of the banner ads. Laskey *et al*³¹ point out that developing of typology classification should identify various types of executional, creative strategy factors, information cues and cultural values that might be employed in the banner ads.

The typology classification used in this study, which developed different sets of potential classification categories, could be related to actual banner ad claims.³² The following set of executional factors, information cues, creative strategies and cultural factors were measured, and product class categories used in previous research.

Coding instrument

Wimmer and Dominick³² emphasize that the careful training of coders is an integral task in any content analysis and usually results in a more reliable analysis (p.152). To maximize inter-coder reliability, coders were carefully instructed to analyze each item based on the codebook. Each banner ad was coded for the presence of information cues, executional factors, creative factors and cultural values.

The coding instrument consisted of four parts. First, the product was classified into 16 product categories. Second, a set of 10 executional factors suggested by Kim and Leckenby²⁴ were used to measure the executional factors for each banner ad. The categories examined were: (1) animated

or static banner; (2) logo (brand name and company); (3) clickable button (for example, 'click here'); (4) Web address (for example, site name or URL); (5) looped or not looped ('looped' in this study meant that the ad ran through its series of movements at least three times after being opened); (6) any number; (7) sentence type (for example, declarative); (8) number of words in the banner; (9) shape of the banner (for example, rectangular, square or other) and (10) size of the banner (based on the standard and guidelines of Internet Advertising Bureau). Third, a set of 8 information cues developed by Okazaki and Alonso³³ and Resnik and Sterns²⁷ were also used to analyze the banner ads. The information cues examined were: (1) price-value; (2) quality; (3) performance; (4) availability; (5) special offer; (6) guarantees or warranties; (7) safety and (8) new ideas. Fourth, the following 10 creative strategies factors developed by Simon² were used to classify creative strategies. These were also used by Kim and Leckenby,²⁴ Oh *et al*,³⁰ and Okazaki³⁴ and included: (1) information; (2) argument (rational reasoning) cues; (3) motivation with psychological appeals; (4) symbolic and visual metaphor-association; (5) imitation (celebrity endorsement); (6) comparison; (7) interactive communication; (8) humorous pictures and message tone; (9) obligation (for example, uses the word 'FREE') and (10) curiosity arousal.

Finally, the banner ads were classified using the following 14 cultural values developed by Mueller,^{16,35} Okazaki,³⁴ Okazaki and Alonso,³⁶ and Cheng and Schweitzer:³⁷ (1) activeness; (2) competition; (3) directness; (4) collectivism; (5) individualism; (6) emotion; (7) rationality; (8) long-term orientation; (9) short-term orientation; (10) social status; (11) youth and modernity; (12) harmony; (13) passiveness and (14) group integrity.

Coder selection and training

Four native coders, unaware of the study's purpose, were selected as recommended by Kolbe and Burnett.³⁷ Also, four people were hired for this project to analyze banner ads. They were then trained to understand the operational definitions of all the variables. The method

employed in this study is that recommended by Kassarian,³⁸ which states that disagreements between two coders should be solved through discussion in order to give the tests higher validity. All these measures were categorical, and the coders judged only the existence of each category, by assigning a number '1' or '0' for 'Yes' or 'No', respectively. The number of words in banner, shape of the banner (for example, rectangular, square or other), and size of the banner (for example, small, full or large) were coded by assigning a number: 1, 2 or 3.

Reliability

All banners were coded for executional, creative factors, information cues and cultural values. Two coders were allocated to each country's content. The coders took a training session, including a practice session, before starting to code. The Scott's Pi formula³⁹ was utilized for the purpose of testing inter-coder reliability and inter-coder reliability tests using Scott's *pi* procedure were done on a randomly selected sub-sample of 10 per cent. Then each coder analyzed 30 banners. In order to satisfy coder reliability, all coding disagreement were resolved first, thus, inter-coder reliability could be reached at the acceptable range of reliability (0.92).

RESULTS

The classification of products is reported in Table 1, which displays the frequency of occurrence of

products in the four countries' banner ads. The product category could be classified in 1220 cases over four countries (China with 305, Japan with 305, Korea with 305 and the United States with 305). Multiple discriminant analysis was applied to determine whether the factors (for example, executional factors, information cues, creative strategies, cultural values) could be successfully classified in relation to their cultural affiliation.⁴⁰ Multiple discriminant analysis across banner ads detected significant differences in the frequency of occurrence of executional, creative strategies factors, 10 information cues and 14 cultural values. When necessary, chi-square analysis was conducted to test hypothesis 5.

To test the hypotheses proposed in this study, multiple discriminant analyses were performed. As noted in Table 2, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Thus, there was a significant difference in executional factors among the four countries' banner ads. As the Table 2 summarizes, Chinese and Korean banner ads employed more animated technique than Japanese and American ads. In American banner ads short text messages were used whereas in Asian countries longer text messages were used. In terms of size of banner, larger size banner displays tended to be used in China, whilst small and medium size banners were more likely to be used in Japan, Korea and the US. A square-shaped banner more frequently appeared in Asian countries whilst rectangular banners were more favoured in the US.

Table 1: Frequency distribution: Products

<i>Types of products</i>	<i>China (n=305)</i>	<i>Japan (n=305)</i>	<i>Korea (n=305)</i>	<i>US (n=305)</i>
1. Telecommunication	6 (1.9%)	6 (1.9%)	20 (6.6%)	4 (1.3%)
2. Cars	29 (9.5%)	19 (6.2%)	30 (9.8%)	22 (7.2%)
3. Electronic products	69 (23%)	25 (8.2%)	23 (7.5%)	47 (15.4%)
4. Travel	0	23 (7.5%)	11 (3.6%)	29 (9.5%)
5. Entertainment	15 (2.1%)	33 (10.8%)	37 (12%)	48 (15.7%)
6. Services	46 (15.2%)	39 (12.8%)	63 (21%)	16 (5.2%)
7. Cosmetics	30 (9.8%)	35 (11.5%)	11 (3.6%)	9 (2.9%)
8. Finance and insurance	6 (1.9%)	32 (10.5%)	29 (9.5%)	36 (11.8%)
9. Pharmaceuticals	7 (2.2%)	0	14 (4.5%)	8 (2.6%)
10. Clothing	49 (15.9%)	16 (5.2%)	14 (4.5%)	27 (8.9%)
11. Food and drinks	30 (9.8%)	20 (6.6%)	23 (7.5%)	13 (4.2%)
12. Household	9 (2.9%)	7 (2.2%)	7 (2.2%)	3 (0.9%)
13. Real estate	3 (2.0%)	21 (6.9%)	6 (1.9%)	2 (0.6%)
14. Jewelry	1 (0.1%)	4 (1.3%)	0	10 (3.2%)
15. Education related	3 (0.9%)	15 (4.9%)	14 (4.5%)	2 (0.6%)
16. Other	2 (0.6%)	10 (3.2%)	3 (0.9%)	29 (9.5%)

Table 2: Analysis of executorial factors

<i>Factors</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Japan</i>	<i>Korea</i>	<i>US</i>	χ^2	<i>d.f.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
1. Animated banner	239	183	248	194	49.60	3	0.000
2. Logo	247	264	230	290	49.21	3	0.000
3. Clickable button	116	180	118	151	36.59	3	0.000
4. Web address	70	18	16	78	84.81	3	0.000
5. Looped or not	187	122	243	115	144.27	3	0.000
6. Any number	169	133	139	166	13.31	3	0.004
7. Sentence type	189	23	102	164	226.05	3	0.000
	<i>Country</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	χ^2	<i>d.f.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
8. Number of words	China	88	133	84	174.35	6	0.000
	Japan	62	135	108			
	Korea	133	113	59			
	US	30	85	190			
9. Shape of banner	China	2	303	0	608.02	6	0.000
	Japan	1	303	1			
	Korea	137	150	18			
	US	77	6	1			
10. Size of Banner	China	109	17	179	856.9	6	0.000
	Japan	80	211	8			
	Korea	180	35	90			
	US	190	286	86			

Note: Number of Words coded 1 for less than 8, 2 for 9 through 13, and 3 for more than 14. Shape of banner coded 1 for Rectangular, 2 for square and 3 for other. Size of banner coded 1 for from 234×60, 125×125, 120×90, 120×60 to 88×31, 2 for from 468×60, 460×55, 390×72 to 34×60, 3 for 250×250 through 160×600. Size of banner is based on the standard and guidelines of Internet Advertising Bureau.

American banner ads were more emphatically explanatory and used larger ad sizes.

Results of the information cues in Table 3 led to strong support for Hypothesis 2. The price value, availability and special offer factors appeared more frequently in Chinese banner ads than in those of the other three countries. Also, the quality, performance, and new idea factors more frequently appeared in Japanese banner ads. However, the safety factor was not found to be significant.

Hypothesis 3 was also supported in the creative factors employed across the four countries' banner ads. There was significant difference in creative factors. The information factor is widely found in Chinese banner ads. The argument, celebrity endorsement, humorous pictures and obligation factors more frequently appeared in Japanese banner ads. Symbolic and metaphorical association alongside curiosity arousal factors were found more in Korean banner ads. The motivation and comparison factors were more apparent in American banner ads. These findings suggest that the American banner ads tended to include more

rational persuasion with higher motivation. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported (See Table 4).

In general support of Hypothesis 4, banner ads reflected by different cultural characteristics exhibited different culture values. There was significant difference in cultural values among all four countries' banner ads. The activeness, individualism, rational appeal, long-term orientation, and passiveness value items were widely apparent in Chinese banner ads. Collectivism, short-term orientation, youth and harmony cultural value factors were more frequently to be found in Japanese banner ads. In Korean banner ads, competition and group integrity cultural value factors appeared more often than in other countries. The social status, directness and emotional appeal cultural factors were more frequently to be found in American banner ads. Overall, the Korean banner ads could be designed by applying harmony values, which have also been termed Confucianism. In comparison to Asian banner ads, American banner ads were more likely to exhibit emotional appeal and socially oriented values (see Table 5).

Table 3: Analysis of information cues

Factors	China	Japan	Korea	US	χ^2	d.f.	Sig.
1. Price-value	102	63	48	40	45.37	3	0.000
2. Quality	131	195	42	42	245.23	3	0.000
3. Performance	177	183	37	81	215.01	3	0.000
4. Availability	166	72	53	52	143.42	3	0.000
5. Special offer	109	81	47	96	35.44	3	0.000
6. Guarantees or warranties	32	15	23	6	20.77	3	0.000
7. Safety	15	19	21	9	5.54	3	0.136
8. New ideas (Novelty)	32	43	37	5	31.94	3	0.000

Table 4: Analysis of creative factors

Factors	China	Japan	Korea	US	χ^2	d.f.	Sig.
1. Information	212	207	46	6	477.02	3	0.000
2. Argument (Rational reasoning) cues	34	128	6	37	197.92	3	0.000
3. Motivation with psychological appeals	102	108	71	297	418.16	3	0.000
4. Symbolic and visual metaphor-association	123	226	290	151	245.38	3	0.000
5. Imitation (Celebrity endorsement)	63	101	36	15	93.38	3	0.000
6. Comparison	6	27	39	53	42.38	3	0.000
7. Interactive communication	14	51	39	8	49.00	3	0.000
8. Humorous picture and message tone	17	143	21	25	261.54	3	0.000
9. Obligation (Use the word 'FREE')	38	47	38	16	16.98	3	0.001
10. Curiosity arousal	42	79	103	51	43.35	3	0.000

Table 5: Analysis of cultural values

Items	China	Japan	Korea	US	χ^2	d.f.	Sig.
1. Activeness	50	22	16	23	27.30	3	0.000
2. Competition	8	24	36	19	20.03	3	0.000
3. Directness	112	35	33	196	275.72	3	0.000
4. Collectivism	45	131	31	105	117.76	3	0.000
5. Individualism	243	174	15	36	500.43	3	0.000
6. Emotional appeal	139	269	38	295	589.56	3	0.000
7. Rational appeal	142	111	15	33	196.68	3	0.000
8. Long-term orientation	73	9	35	36	62.14	3	0.000
9. Short-term orientation	171	294	14	190	530.64	3	0.000
10. Social status	22	41	13	80	77.91	3	0.000
11. Youth and modernity	91	101	33	33	79.02	3	0.000
12. Harmony	45	57	35	4	49.55	3	0.000
13. Passiveness	63	17	3	12	98.39	3	0.000
14. Group integrity	7	26	29	11	20.68	3	0.000

As Hypothesis 5 proposed, there was a significant difference in conscious-oriented and subliminally-oriented appeals among all four countries' banner ads. Korean banner ads used less conscious-oriented appeals than US banner ads, preferring more subliminally-oriented appeals. Table 6 displays the frequencies of the conscious- and subliminally-oriented creative strategy factors ($\chi^2=314.83$ for conscious and $\chi^2=236.91$ for subliminal-oriented creative strategy factor, $P<0.001$) across the four countries.

Table 6: Conscious versus subliminally oriented creative strategy factors

Factors	China	Japan	Korea	US	$\chi^2(d.f.=3)$
Conscious-oriented	241	261	120	298	314.83***
Subliminal-oriented	161	257	297	157	236.91***

*** $P<0.001$.

Note: Based on previous classification Oh *et al*⁽³⁰⁾, conscious-oriented creative strategy factors consist of information, argument (rational reasoning) cues, motivation with psychological appeals and curiosity arousal whereas subliminally oriented creative strategy factors consist of symbolic and visual metaphor-association and imitation (celebrity endorsement).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to examine cultural differences in the use of creative strategy, information cues, executional and cultural factors, and across brands with various products. These variables were employed in four countries' banner ads. It was expected that banner advertising would be different across cultures, as has been observed in many prior studies of traditional media. This study demonstrated that there was a difference in informativeness, information cues, creative strategy, executional and cultural factors among four countries' banner ads. The results confirmed that the four different countries' banner ads were statistically classifiable into their cultural affiliations across all variables. However, the safety factor in information cues was not statistically different. Hofstede, Hall and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner have suggested specific cultural differences to which cross-cultural advertisers should pay attention in order for their messages to be effective. That is to say, advertising designers should pay attention to the distinctive cultural characteristics of the audiences they want to reach.

In terms of executional factors, there was a higher frequency of words on banner ads in the US than in Asian countries. It should be noted that the Asian banner ads tends to include visual images such as animation and contain less product explanation. More detailed explanations of product in the context of rectangular banner ads are to be found more frequently in the United States. We can suggest that American banner ads can be interpreted as being set in a culture that focuses on rational argument and hard-sell appeal. Performance and special offers are also major information cues in Chinese and Japanese banner ads, whereas American and Korean banner ads tend to use various information cues of the product. Moreover, the Chinese and Japanese banner ads could be distinguished in their focus on price-value, quality, special offer and warranties, whereas the American banner ad tended to emphasize practical and functional attributes. Also, creative strategy factors, argument and rational reasoning cues, motivation with psychological appeals, and comparison are critical factors in American banner ads whilst

interactive communication and symbolic, visual metaphor-association, and curiosity arousal are the important creative factors in Korean banner ads. The information, celebrity endorsement, humor and obligation factors are more frequently apparent in Chinese and Japanese banner ads. Factors comprising motivation with psychological appeals, and symbolic and visual metaphor association have been considered as the most representative values in both Western and Eastern society.^{15,30,34,35,41,42}

As previous studies addressing cross-cultural comparisons also found,^{30,34,43} this study confirmed that American banner ads could be focused on more complex or sophisticated messages which mixed rational, entertaining and emotional appeals, whereas the Asian banner ads tend to use more symbolic and metaphoric appeals. The presence of cultural harmony factors in Korean banner ads reflects the importance of social harmony in that culture. Nevertheless, the few observations of emotional appeals in the Korean and Chinese banner ads on the one hand and of collectivism appeals in the Japanese and US ads were rather surprising and suggests a need for more detailed exploration.

The findings from this study were therefore consistent with those of previous studies related to cross-cultural study, and showed the role of cultural influences in the design of creative strategies. In addition, there was a difference in the executional strategy factors employed across the four countries. One interpretation might be that four countries' banner ads could be effectively designed by applying a different consumer segmentation in each country.

Cross-cultural marketers and advertisers should use these insights to develop culturally adapted websites and banner advertising, or analyze their existing global Internet advertising activity to measure the degree of adaptation targeted toward a particular culture.

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