

**Cross-Cultural Content Analysis of Advertising  
from the United States and India**

by

**Niaz Ahmed**

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University of Southern Mississippi

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FROM THE UNITED STATES AND INDIA

by

Niaz Ahmed

Abstract of a Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of the University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 1996

ABSTRACT

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Niaz Ahmed

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This cross-cultural content analysis (which merged traditional content analysis method with semiotic concepts) compared advertising in the United States (a highly individualistic and low-context culture) and India (a highly collectivist and high-context culture). The study examined the characteristics, differences and similarities in advertising strategies and expressions. A stratified random sample of advertisements for consumer products was selected from nationally circulated news magazines and business magazines of each country between January 1993 and December 1994 (*Time* and *Business Week* from the United States; *India Today* and *Business India* from India).

This study found that there were significant differences in the way the two cultures produced advertising messages and that differential cultural values were reflected in their advertising expressions. The findings revealed that the U.S. advertisements utilized direct rhetorical styles, individualistic visual stances, sexual portrayals of women and comparative approaches more often than their Indian counterparts. The Indian ads utilized indirect rhetorical styles, collective visual stances and stereotypical portrayals of women more frequently than did the U.S. ads.

The evidence of specific cross-cultural differences suggests that perhaps the proponents of “standardization of international advertising” have promoted an oversimplification. This cross-cultural study suggests that caution should be exercised when considering standardization in advertising and other forms of promotional communication between divergent cultures.

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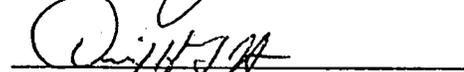
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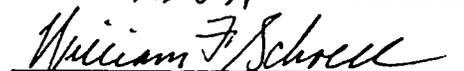


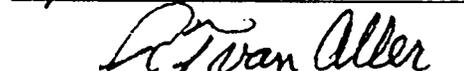
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DEDICATION

TO MY  
PARENTS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of advertising has long been a subject of research in several disciplines such as mass communication, marketing, sociology, cultural anthropology, social psychology, semiotics and cultural studies. One area that has attracted a great deal of attention in several disciplines during the last two decades is the analysis of mass media advertising content to gain insights into how cultural factors affect advertising strategies and expressions; how cultural values, norms and stereotypes are reflected in advertising; how advertising creates meanings and affects the audience and the larger society over time (e.g., Berman, 1981; Eco, 1977, 1979; Haskins & Kendrick, 1991; Leiss, Kline & Jhally, 1986; McQuail, 1994; Noth, 1990; Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985; Williamson, 1978). Whether from a quantitative, qualitative or interpretative perspective, whether a researcher follows the modern social scientific approach, critical theory perspective or postmodernist approach, analysis of advertising and other media content is of growing importance.

Although the phenomenon of advertising has been studied for several decades, cross-cultural advertising research is a relatively new area of study. In recent years, the study of cross-cultural advertising has become a subject of increasing importance because of several important developments:

- As the integration of the world economy has increased significantly in recent years and as nations of the world have become increasingly economically interdependent through international trade--diverse people and cultures are coming into contact through interpersonal interaction as well as advertising and other media images and messages. In an increasingly global economic environment, international trade has achieved phenomenal growth resulting in increased international mass media advertising across diverse cultures (Mooij & Keegan, 1991).
- Recent developments in several regions of the world--such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its adoption of free enterprise systems, democratization of the Eastern Europe and its transformation to a market economy, reunification of Germany, the formation of the EU, export-led rapid economic growth of the NICs (Newly Industrialized Countries), and opening of markets in Asia and Latin America--have revitalized the notion of a global marketplace, and encouraged many marketers to internationalize their businesses.

- The marketing debates about globalization of markets came to the forefront in the 1980s and continue today to polarize advertising practitioners and researchers over the question of whether or not consumers around the world are becoming homogeneous (in terms of values, desires and tastes) (Cateora, 1987; Hite & Fraser, 1988; Levitt, 1983; Onkvisit & Shaw, 1985).
- The "cultural imperialism" issue has attracted a great deal of attention over the impact of Western advertising and other media products on the cultures of developing nations (Fejes, 1980; Mattelart, 1983; Schiller, 1983).
- In recent years, there has been an increasing interest over the issue of how advertising reflects, reinforces and affects cultural values of its target audience (Holbrook, 1987; Pollay, 1986, 1987).

Cross-cultural analysis of advertising can identify specific differences and similarities in advertising strategies, expressions, and manifest cultural values, norms and stereotypes of the target audience and the larger culture. Such findings may be used to address the question of whether the same strategies and expressions can be used in international advertising, and whether the values, attitudes, desires and tastes of consumers around the world are converging (e.g., Frith & Wesson, 1991; Hong, Muderrisoglu & Zinkhan, 1987; Mueller, 1987).

Comparative analysis of advertising from Western industrialized countries and Eastern developing countries may reveal specific similarities or differences in manifest cultural values, norms and stereotypes in line with, or divergent from, those of Western nations. Such information can be used to address the question of cultural imperialism and the debates over whether and how advertising reflects, reinforces and affects cultural values of its target audience. On the other hand, findings about gender role portrayals in advertising may reveal how sex roles are changing in these societies, and to what extent the images of the sexes in advertising are keeping pace with social change.

From a more pragmatic standpoint, if specific cross-cultural differences or similarities in advertising strategies, expressions and manifest values and norms can be identified, researchers and practitioners will better understand which aspects of advertising can be shared across several countries, and conversely, which aspects need to be adapted to local cultures. As indicated by previous research, many advertising strategies and expressions (e.g., direct or indirect comparative technique; rational or emotional approach; individualistic stance or collective stance

in visuals; direct or indirect rhetorical styles; high or low level of information cues, emphasis on certain information cues) may be influenced by important cultural values such as individualism, collectivism, rational reasoning, emotionalism, and low context culture vs. high context culture (e.g., Cutler & Javalgi, 1992; Frith & Wesson, 1991; Hong, Muderrisoglu & Zinkhan, 1987). From the standpoint of international marketing and advertising practitioners, such cross-cultural understanding is imperative in order to be able to formulate effective localized advertising that would appeal to or reflect the cultural values and norms of its intended audience (Belk & Pollay, 1985; Munson & McIntyre, 1979; Henry, 1976). In a broader sense, a localized approach is beneficial not only to the international marketer (more effective in getting its message across) but also to the larger host society (its culture is not adversely affected by alien values, beliefs and lifestyles).

Although several cross-cultural content analyses of advertising have been conducted in recent years, most of them compared either two or more Western industrialized countries or two or more Western and Eastern industrialized countries (only two studies included a developing country). For example, Weinberger and Spotts (1989) comparatively analyzed the information content of British and U.S. television advertising; Biswas, Olsen and Carlet (1992) conducted a comparative content analysis of information content and emotional appeals in print advertisements from the United States and France; Cutler and Javalgi (1992) conducted a cross-cultural analysis of the visual components of print advertising from the United States, France and the United Kingdom; Frith and Wesson (1991) conducted a comparative content analysis to examine manifest cultural values in advertising of the United States and England; Ramaprasad (1992) comparatively analyzed the information content of American and Japanese television commercials; Mueller (1987), examined the usage of advertising appeals in magazine advertisements of the United States and Japan; Madden, Caballero and Masukubo (1986) analyzed the information content in Japanese and U.S. magazine advertising; Hong et al. (1987) also examined the information content of U.S. and Japanese magazine advertising.

The only two cross-cultural studies involving developed and developing countries were Gilly's (1988) study comparing gender portrayals in advertising of the United States, Australia and Mexico, and Alden, Hoyer & Lee's (1993) study examining the use of humor in advertising of the United States, Germany, Thailand and South Korea. To date, there is no cross-cultural study that comparatively analyzes advertising in India and the United States.

Evidently, there is a need for cross-cultural advertising studies about industrially developing countries in the Eastern cultural environment and highly industrialized countries in the Western cultural context. Moreover, there is a need for more comprehensive cross-cultural approaches to the analysis and interpretation of the verbal as well as visual content of advertising. Most previous cross-cultural advertising studies were conducted following the traditional quantitative content analysis method and examined only the verbal content of advertising. One reason for this narrow approach is that the traditional quantitative content analysis method is not very effective in analyzing culture-specific elements and connotations in visual content of advertising. In single-country analysis (e.g. U.S. advertising), some qualitative researchers have used semiotics and other interpretative methods to analyze the linguistic as well as visual content of advertising (e.g., Barthes, 1964, 1977; Eco, 1977, 1979; Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985; Williamson, 1978). However, in cross-cultural advertising studies, analysis of the verbal content has been the most dominant direction. Whether from a pragmatic perspective (e.g. international marketing and advertising), or critical perspective (e.g., cultural studies), analysis of only the verbal content is not sufficient to address the important issues of cross-cultural advertising. This is due to advertising's generally communicating its messages not only through its verbal content but also in conjunction with its visual content.

With this realization in recent years, a few well-known researchers in several disciplines (e.g., marketing, sociology, anthropology) combined the traditional quantitative content analysis method with semiotic concepts and approaches to study advertising communication (e.g., Frith & Wesson, 1991; Leiss, Kline & Jhally, 1986; Umiker-Sebeok, 1987). This new interdisciplinary approach has been gaining importance since the First International Conference on Semiotics and

Marketing in 1985 and the establishment of a new publication entitled Marketing Signs . This new approach can be extended to a cross-cultural study of advertising to examine both verbal and visual content. Indeed, the merging of semiotic concepts and traditional quantitative content analysis is extremely useful in cross-cultural analysis because semiotic concepts can be effectively applied in examining visual content of advertising.

In this context, a cross-cultural analysis of the verbal as well as visual content of print advertising in India and the United States was conducted to examine the characteristics, differences and similarities in advertising strategies and expressions. The study followed the traditional content analysis method. However, following the new interdisciplinary approach, some semiotic concepts were applied as well.

The advertising was analyzed and compared in terms of

1. Linguistic codification (informational, directive, poetic and expressive speech acts).
2. Visual codification (iconic stance of characters, indexical value transfer, iconic image of women).
3. Combined verbal/visual codification (direct and indirect comparative approach).

The results of this study are expected to provide cross-cultural understanding and insights into the nature of advertising in the 1990s in the United States and India. The comparative and descriptive analyses are expected to offer an in-depth understanding of the characteristics, similarities and differences in advertising strategies and expressions of India and the United States. This study is also the first to provide a comprehensive cross-cultural approach to the analysis and interpretation of the verbal as well as visual content of advertising. The results will be of particular interest to those international marketers entering the markets of India and the United States and other countries with similar cultures and socioeconomic environments.

This study will also be used as a basis for a future study that will examine the comparative effectiveness as well as social-cultural effects of various types of advertising

expressions on the audiences of India and the United States. The current study can be viewed as in the tradition of the “cultivation analysis” method which analyzes and documents dominant messages and themes in media content, and then, through a separate study of the audience, examines the effects of such messages on the heavy media users (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991). A similar method was also used by Stewart and Furse (1986) to examine content characteristics and effectiveness of advertising in the United States. Stewart and Furse conducted a content analysis of U.S. television commercials, and later through a separate experimental study examined which advertising strategies and expressions resulted in greater commercial effectiveness.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the cross-cultural empirical studies that have been conducted to date compared either two or more Western industrialized countries or Western and Eastern industrial countries (with a few exceptions). Studies that conducted cross-cultural content analysis and provide background information for conceptual analysis will be reviewed first. Other related studies that do not fall under the umbrella of cross-cultural content analysis but are relevant and useful in understanding the issues of cross-cultural advertising will also be reviewed.

#### Cross-Cultural Content Analysis of Advertising

Weinberger and Spotts (1989) conducted a comparative content analysis of the information content in television advertising in the United States and the United Kingdom. The results revealed that U.S. television advertising contained a higher level of information content than British advertising. A comparison between the U.S. sample and a 1977 Resnik and Stern study showed that informativeness has increased in U.S. advertising over a decade. Overall, the ads for high involvement and rational products contained higher information content. The researchers concluded that the differences between the U.S. and British advertising are related to the underlying sociocultural setting in the respective countries.

Biswas, Olsen and Carlet (1992) comparatively analyzed magazine advertisements of France and the United States in terms of information content, emotional appeals, use of humor and sex. The study revealed that French advertisements made greater use of emotional appeals, humor and sex appeals, while U.S. advertisements contained a greater number of information cues.

Cutler and Javalgi (1992) conducted a comparative analysis of the visual content of print advertising from the United States, France and England. The results revealed greater country differences than similarities in terms of various visual components in advertising. Differences were found in seven elements (size of the visual, use of black & white visuals, use of photograph

as opposed to illustrations, size of product in the visual, product comparison, use of symbolic process appeal, frequency of portraying children in the visual). Similarities were found in product portrayal, minority portrayal and elderly portrayal. The researchers suggested that international advertisers should standardize or localize visual elements of their advertising accordingly.

Frith and Wesson (1991) compared the content of print advertising from the United States and England in terms of manifest cultural values. The study found that magazine advertisements in the United States portrayed characters in more “individualistic” stances than British advertisements. On the other hand, British advertisements made social class differences more evident. Based on the findings, the researchers suggested that because of cultural differences uniform international advertising will not be effective.

Belk and Bryce (1986) examined television advertisements in Japan and the United States. Using a content analysis method they attempted to determine if there was any cultural value difference in advertising in terms of materialism and individual determinism. The study found that the U.S. advertisements placed more emphasis on individual determinism and materialism.

Mueller (1987) examined magazine advertisements of Japan and the United States. Using a content analysis method, the author compared the themes in advertising and concluded that there were considerable similarities among the consumers in the two countries. The researcher found that the same basic advertising appeals were used in both U.S. and Japanese advertisements. However, the degree to which these appeals were used varied from one country to another. Muller suggests that the sensitivity to cultural differences is reflected through the varied degrees of the same appeals. The author concluded that appeals such as product merit and status appeal are universal.

Hong et al. (1987) comparatively analyzed magazine advertisements of Japan and the United States to determine how advertising expressions and content differed in the two cultures. The variables examined were emotional appeals, informativeness and comparativeness of

advertising. The analysis revealed that Japanese advertisements were more emotional and less comparative than the U.S. advertisements. In terms of information content, there was no difference in the advertisements of the two countries.

Tansey, Hyman and Zinkhan (1990) conducted a content analysis of Brazilian and U.S. auto advertisements to determine the extent of work themes, urban themes and leisure themes. The analysis of automobile advertisements in business magazines of Brazil and the United States revealed that urban themes were used more frequently in Brazilian advertisements than in the U.S. advertisements, while leisure themes were used more frequently in the U.S. advertisements. The extent of work themes was found to be similar in Brazilian and U.S. advertising. The researchers concluded that cultural values differ between the business classes of the United States and Brazil. The authors noted that these findings provide evidence against use of similar themes across cultures.

Gilly (1988) compared sex role portrayals in television advertisements of the United States, Australia and Mexico. Results of this comparative content analysis revealed that sex role stereotypes are present in advertising in all three countries, but are manifested in different ways. Among the three countries, the Australian advertising displayed fewer sex role differences than the U.S. and Mexican advertising. Comparing the findings about Australian advertising with the studies conducted 12 years ago, the researcher found that sex role portrayals have changed over the years (less stereotypical now). The researcher noted that international marketers should be aware of the cultural norms in terms of sex role portrayals as well as how they are changing.

Ramaprasad and Hasegawa (1992) compared the information content of television commercials in Japan and the United States. The findings revealed that most Japanese and U.S. commercials emphasized similar kinds of information cues. However, they differed in the average number of cues employed in some product and strategy categories. The authors suggested caution in using the same advertising approaches in the United States and Japan.

Rice and Lu (1988) conducted a content analysis of Chinese magazine advertisements. The researchers analyzed the levels of advertising information based on type of magazine and

type of product. The findings indicated that Chinese magazine advertisements contained relatively large amounts of information compared to previous content analyses of Western advertising.

Alden, Hoyer and Lee (1993) conducted a cross-cultural analysis of the use of humor in advertising. The researchers examined the content of humorous television advertising from Korea, Germany, Thailand and the United States. Their findings revealed that humorous advertising in these diverse cultures shares certain universal cognitive structures underlying the message. However, the results indicated that the specific content of humorous advertising was likely to vary along major normative dimensions such as individualism and collectivism.

Klassen, Jasper and Schartz (1993) examined how men and women are portrayed in magazine advertisements in the United States. A longitudinal content analysis of United States magazine advertisements revealed that a disproportionately high number of advertisements portrayed women in traditional poses relative to advertisements that featured men and women together as equals. However, the traditional portrayals of women have been decreasing since the early 1980s, and “equality portrayals” are increasing.

#### Other Relevant and Related Studies

Britt (1974) identified and discussed three factors that might affect the transferability of advertising: consumption patterns, psychological characteristics and cultural criteria. The author suggested that if pattern of purchase and usage varies widely in the target countries then direct transfer of advertising would not be effective. Britt also argues that if the consumers in the target countries have very similar psychological characteristics, such as the same motivation for purchase or favorable attitude toward the brand name, then the same strategy could be used. If the characteristics vary from country to country, then the same advertising appeal would not work. Finally the author suggests that cultural factors, such as social stigma or tradition, may have a significant impact on the way the product and its advertising message would be perceived by the consumers of that culture.

Dunn (1976) conducted a survey of U.S. multinational managers to determine the relative importance of various factors affecting transferability of advertising. The researcher found that the majority of the multinational managers who responded to the questionnaires ranked "rate of economic growth of country" to be the most important variable in making advertising transfer decisions. Other factors that were perceived to be important were the following: eating patterns and customs, average size of household, social class structure, attitudes toward authority, degree of nationalism in country, attitudes toward achievement and work, attitudes toward risk taking, attitudes toward wealth and monetary gain, similarity of ethical and moral standard to the United States.

Twelve years later, Hite and Fraser (1988) conducted a similar survey of U.S. multinational managers and found that "rate of economic growth" is still an important factor that affects the transferability of advertising. Other related factors that were perceived to be important include brand name acceptance, education level, government control of media, nationalism, attitudes of people toward the United States and eating patterns of people. These factors were adopted from Dunn's (1976) list of 31 factors. A comparison of this study with that of Dunn's indicates that some of the factors gained more importance over the years.

Cundiff and Hilger (1984) conducted a survey that found the following factors to be important: levels of economic development, consumption pattern, cultural diversity, and brand name acceptance. An international marketer must analyze each market before formulating an international advertising strategy. The authors also indicated that cultural diversity and translation problems discourage standardization of advertising message. The authors identified some cultural factors such as individualism vs. conformity, conservatism vs. desire for change, social mobility vs. social stability, and suspicion vs. credibility. It is suggested that such cultural factors have a significant impact on consumers' perceptions of international advertising messages. The researchers also indicate that if the consumers in the target countries use the product in similar ways, if it satisfies the same needs and if the buyer motivation is the same, then the same strategies or tactics can be effectively used in all target countries.

Ricks, Arpan and Fu (1974) discussed several factors that could have a significant impact on international advertising. The authors reported several cases of international advertising failure and showed how linguistic and cultural factors influenced the consumers' perception of international advertising. The authors suggest that different languages, customs, attitudes, preferences and needs make it necessary to adapt to local conditions. The researchers indicated that most international advertising blunders occur because the advertisers fail to understand and consider cultural differences. The researchers recommended the effective use of local experts in the planning and implementation of international advertising campaigns.

The Green and Langeard (1975) study attempted to determine if there were differences in characteristics and behaviors between U.S. and French consumers (innovators). The researchers utilized a sample of 193 Texan women and 226 French women. Based on responses to mailed and self-administered questionnaires, the researchers found that there were significant differences in media use and buying habits for tangible products and services.

Boote (1983) investigated the psychographic characteristics of consumers in the United Kingdom, Germany and France. A 29-item value scale was employed to measure a random sample of women in each of these countries. The results revealed that there were some similarities within subgroups of the three countries. However, there were some differences as well. The consumers of the three countries ranked the value statements differently.

Caffyn and Rogers (1970) attempted to determine if British consumers would perceive British and U.S. television advertisements differently. The researchers surveyed 1,200 British consumers and found significant differences in the perception of British and U.S. commercials. The results indicated that the British consumers perceived the U.S. ads to be entertaining but less persuasive than the British ads. The researchers suggested that sociocultural and marketing differences between the United Kingdom and the United States might render a standardized approach ineffective.

Colvin, Heeler and Thorpe (1980) examined the applicability of a combination strategy or the so-called pattern standardization. The researchers utilized stratified samples of British,

French and German car buyers. Respondents were asked to rank 27 automobile attributes and purchase interest. The findings revealed that a single-theme strategy could be used in some countries, while modifications were required for other countries.

An earlier study by Donnelly (1970) examined the relationship between an advertising manager's attitude toward the importance of cultural variables and the international advertising strategy employed by his or her firm. Based on a sample of 121 U.S. advertising managers, the findings revealed a significant relationship between the variable of attitude toward culture and strategy employed. The results indicated that the companies in which the advertising managers believed cultural differences were important utilized more decentralized planning and localized message.

The literature reviewed clearly indicates that almost all (with two exceptions) cross-cultural content analysis of advertising has concerned only industrially developed countries. The surveys that were conducted in related areas were also mostly about industrially developed countries. Needless to say, there is a great need for comparative analysis of advertising from developing and developed countries.

## CHAPTER III

### CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

This section discusses several concepts and theories which will provide a conceptual background for the present cross-cultural study.

#### Communication and Culture

The influence of culture on communication is well documented by researchers in many disciplines. One of the most difficult challenges for international marketers is communicating to people of diverse cultures. Cultural differences may exist not only between nations but also within a nation itself. Such cultural and microcultural differences present a formidable challenge to international marketing and advertising practitioners because the value systems, attitudes, perceptions and communication of individuals and groups are all culturally shaped or influenced (Samover & Porter, 1991; Tan, 1986).

As research indicates, advertising, a form of social communication, is also influenced by various elements of the originating culture (e.g., Frith & Wesson, 1991; Hong et al., 1987; Mueller, 1987; Rice & Lu, 1988; Tansey et al., 1990). On the other hand, cultural values may determine the differential meanings that people derive from advertising messages (Cundiff & Hilger, 1984; Hornik, 1980; McCracken, 1986; Onkvisit & Shaw, 1983). Advertising may also shape or affect the values of its consumers over time (Ewen & Ewen, 1982; Ferguson et al., 1990; Pollay, 1986, 1987).

In his research reports, Pollay stated that advertising was a "distorted mirror" in that it reflects only certain underlying values and lifestyles. He also noted that advertising was a "distorting mirror" as well, because it strengthened those values by providing reinforcement, and these reinforced and strengthened values then would feedback into the culture. "Cultural evolution can be expected toward the values seen in commercial communication" (Pollay, 1987, p. 108).

It is well documented in many disciplines (e.g., sociology, cultural anthropology, mass communication, marketing, cultural studies, semiotics) that advertising reflects and reinforces many of the social values, norms and stereotypes of its audiences (Coser et al., 1987; Holbrook, 1987; McQuail, 1994; Mueller, 1987; Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985). Two well-known semiotic researchers, Fiske and Hartley (1978, 1980) noted that advertising does not represent the “manifest actuality” of the society, but rather symbolically reflects the social values. The researchers pointed out that advertising insists on an idealized goal of achieving personal happiness, success and security, and it does this by first depicting a world--overrepresented by young, beautiful, successful, happy, wealthy people, and then creating a desire in the audience to better their lives or to achieve the desirable attributes of the people in the advertisement, and finally it portrays the product (explicitly, implicitly or symbolically) as a bridge toward achieving that goal (Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985). However, in order to attract and hold the attention of the potential consumers and create a favorable attitude toward the product, advertising must reflect the cultural values and norms of the society. Therefore, it is possible to gain an insight into the current social values and norms (values may change over time) by analyzing the structures of meaning found in advertisements. Analysis of advertising and other media content is preferred by many quantitative as well as qualitative researchers over surveys of the audience, because people are not always able to identify the cultural values, norms, beliefs and attitudes which they take for granted (Frith & Wesson, 1991; Noth, 1990; Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985).

In the still-new area of cross-cultural advertising research, a few researchers have used analysis of advertising content not only to gain insights into cross-cultural differences and similarities in advertising strategies and expressions, but also to understand what cultural values, norms and stereotypes are manifested in various advertising strategies and expressions across several countries. Since cross-cultural analysis of advertising is a new research area, many of the previous researchers developed their conceptual framework by borrowing concepts and