

CELEBRITY ADVERTISING IN JAPAN AND KOREA: DOING IT THE ASIAN WAY?

Wei-Na Lee, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA

Sejung Marina Choi, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA

Wanhsiu Sunny Tsai, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, California, USA

Abstract

As cultural symbols, celebrities are used in advertising to connect with consumers and draw their attention to the endorsed brand. Past research has found cross-cultural differences largely between Eastern and Western countries in their practice of celebrity advertising. This study focuses on Japan and Korea, two Asian countries known for their extensive use of celebrity advertising, and examines the content of primetime television commercials to gain an in-depth understanding of celebrity endorsers' characteristics and related executional styles. Results suggest that although similar cultural milieus of Japan and Korea have led to a largely comparable practice of celebrity advertising, a number of fine differences in their executions are observed. Collectively, they provide valuable insights to a uniquely Asian practice of celebrity endorsement in advertising. Extensive discussions and suggestions for future research in this area are provided.

Introduction

Using celebrities as spokespersons to promote products, services and ideas has been a popular advertising strategy around the world. Celebrities are believed to exert special influence on the public via advertising due to their distinctive qualities compared to average persons or anonymous models. As their images are created in a public stage and their meanings are derived from the culture, celebrities are often viewed as symbols of the culture. The use of such personas in advertising and its impact are therefore likely to vary from culture to culture (Choi, Lee and Kim 2005). Since the public's fascination with famous people is universal and celebrity endorsement is contingent upon cultural contexts (Hsu and McDonald 2002; Pringle 2004), a cross-cultural examination of celebrity advertising should offer timely insights for international advertising in both theoretical and practical terms. This is especially true these days as more and more companies go global and countries around the world become connected economically and culturally.

Japan and Korea are two countries known for their strong affinity toward using celebrities in their ads (Choi et al. 2005; Praet 2002). Therefore, an analysis of such practice in Japan and Korea will help us understand if and how these two countries, usually classified as similar according to key cultural orientations such as individualism and collectivism, could vary in their use of celebrity endorsement. Furthermore, this study explores the executional styles of celebrity advertising in order to offer qualitative insights as well as quantitative information on variations of celebrity endorsement. Results of this study should provide additional factors worthy of consideration in cross-cultural study on the use of celebrity endorsement and guide future research in this area.

Additionally, the observed characteristics of celebrity advertising in Japan and Korea should offer useful implications for international advertisers.

Background

McCracken (1989) suggests that a celebrity endorser is “any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement” (p. 310). Compared to anonymous actors used in advertising, celebrities deliver meanings to the ad and the product with depth and power. While an anonymous person may provide demographic cues such as age, gender and role, celebrities offer all these meanings with special precision. In addition, they offer a holistic image and personality through associations.

Past research findings on cross-cultural comparisons appear to almost always suggest that when cultures are different, so does the practice of celebrity endorsement. Implicitly, when cultures are similar, such practice should be very similar. However, there is little or no research evidence to validate this belief. Therefore, a closer examination of culturally similar countries is a logical step forward towards a deeper understanding of the use of celebrity endorsement in connection with its cultural contexts. For this purpose, Japan and Korea should serve as a suitable pair for cross-cultural comparisons because these two geographically adjacent countries share similar cultural orientations and are known for their extensive use of celebrities in advertising.

With 127 million people and a GDP of \$3.5 trillion, Japan is the world’s 10th most populous country and the third-largest economy (The World Factbook 2006). This makes Japan an important market for many global businesses. Although highly desirable, Japan is considered “the toughest market in the world” to tackle by managers of leading global companies. While Japanese consumers are affluent, they are also highly demanding. Japanese advertisers have discovered that one way to do so is through the use of celebrities. Since almost all of Japanese commercials are 15 seconds in length, celebrity endorsers are also believed to be an attention-getting device good at breaking through the clutter.

Meanwhile, across the Sea of Japan, Korea is the world’s 10th largest economy with \$965 billions in GDP (The World Factbook 2006). In addition to being an important part of the high-technology modern world economy, Korea today is also at the center of Asian popular culture and consumerism. As the “Korean Wave” (*Hallyu*) sweeps through the rest of Asia with its dramas, movies, popular music and consumer products, its impact can be felt even across the Pacific Ocean and in the U.S. Culturally speaking, Korean consumers are said to be accepting of advice from public or high status figures such as celebrities (Hofstede 1980; Zandupor et al. 1994). It is no wonder that among a variety of advertising strategies, celebrity endorsement is heavily favored by Korean advertisers.

Delving into the practice of celebrity advertising in those two countries would provide additional insights on how a myriad of other cultural variables should be considered in explaining a phenomenon that appears to be unique to the Asia Pacific region. To this end, the following questions need to be answered: (1) What is the frequency of celebrity endorsement in primetime television commercials in Japan and in Korea respectively? (2) What are the common characteristics among Japanese and Korean celebrities? (3) What is the extent of multiple product endorsement by a celebrity

in Japanese and Korean television advertising respectively? And, (4) What roles do celebrity endorsers play in Japanese and Korean television advertising?

The Content Analysis Study

To obtain comparable sets of television commercials for the content analysis, primetime programming on major national networks (Japan: TV Asahi, Fuji TV, NTV and TBS; Korea: MBC, SBS, and KBS2) in each country was taped for one week during spring of 2004 and 2005. The samples consisted of only national brand commercials. Coding categories were adapted from past research or developed for this study. A set of categories were designed to record characteristics of individual celebrity endorsers including their gender and professional fields.

Two Japanese/English bilinguals and two Korean/English bilinguals, who were blind to the purpose of the study, were hired for coding in this study. Prior to the main coding task, coders were trained with a small set of ads which were not part of the study sample. Intercoder reliability was determined by using the Perreault and Leigh (1989) formula. In general, reliability index exceeded the acceptable level.

A total of 2,730 and 911 national commercials, including duplicates, from Japan and Korea were examined respectively. Among them, commercials in which celebrities appeared were counted and selected for the final samples. This procedure yielded a total of 1,310 Japanese and 458 Korean celebrity commercials with duplications. This sample with duplications was used to answer the first question pertaining to the frequency of celebrity appearances since the audience's exposure to this type of advertising in comparison to other types is important in assessing the prevalence of the celebrity endorsement advertising strategy. To investigate the characteristics of celebrity endorsers, 314 and 124 unique celebrities were identified from Japanese and Korean commercials respectively.

Summary of Findings

Commercials in both Japan and Korea were found to employ a great number of celebrity endorsers as expected. Celebrities appeared in 48% of Japanese commercials and about half of Korean ads were found to feature celebrities.

There were slightly more male than female celebrities employed in both countries. A majority of the celebrities in both Japanese and Korean commercials fell into the category of actors/actresses, followed by music artists. Comedians were the third most common type of celebrities in Japanese commercials, followed by athletes. An interesting category observed from both countries includes celebrities who acted and sang at the same time. This trend of multi-talented entertainers is fairly common among younger generations of celebrities. All of the celebrities featured in Japanese and Korean commercials were domestic stars with only a few exceptions of foreign celebrities.

Approximately a quarter of Japanese and Korean celebrities appeared in commercials for more than one product. Considering the rather short duration of just one week for the study, this suggests that a considerable number of celebrities could be associated with multiple products simultaneously. Astonishingly, the number of products with which each of the celebrities was linked within or across categories ranged from two

to six in Japan and from two to five in Korea. This appears to be a practice unique to Japan and Korea. Another notable observation was that a number of commercials featured more than one celebrity in a single ad. In both countries, a group of celebrities, related or not, sometimes appeared in a commercial, sharing the burden of endorsing the product or augmenting each other in a collective manner.

A different pattern between the two countries emerged as to the function of the celebrities in creative executions. In Japanese commercials, over half of the unique incidences of celebrity appearance portrayed celebrity endorsers as themselves whereas a smaller percentage of celebrities acted as an average Joe character. The opposite was true for Korean commercials. More celebrities in Korean ads appeared to play the role of an average Joe, while fewer appeared as themselves. An interesting observation is that about 10% of celebrity endorsements in Korea drew on a pre-established image of the celebrities by portraying the character for which they are already known whereas such practice is not as common as in Japan with less than 1% incidence.

Concluding Remarks

Two similar cultures were examined in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the use of celebrity endorsement in advertising across cultures. Findings of this investigation suggest that the similar cultural milieus of Japan and Korea indeed might have led to a largely comparable practice of celebrity endorsement in advertising. However, there are still a number of fine differences in their executions. Common characteristics as well as subtle differences between Japan and Korea in their practice of celebrity advertising are documented and discussed to guide future research in this area.

Although the findings of this exploratory investigation are descriptive, a number of insights may be gained by interpreting the patterns discovered. These insights include: celebrity clutter, the use of mega vs. mini celebrities, multiple product endorsement by a celebrity, multiple celebrity endorsement of a product, the dominance of domestic celebrities, celebrities as the average Joe, and celebrity ads as an extension of entertainment. Collectively, these insights will offer directions for future research on cross-cultural use of celebrity advertising pertaining specifically to the Asia Pacific region.

With the advent and vitality of the Korean Wave, the Asia Pacific region is said to move towards the development of a regional culture. This pan Asian culture could be very different from a global culture that is often represented by the dominant Western countries (Cho 2005). As carriers of popular culture, celebrities naturally play an important role in this cultural fusion process. Understanding the use of celebrities in advertising or any other cultural form is a necessary step toward unraveling the Asian culture in transition.

References

1. Cho, Hae-Joang (2005), "Reading the "Korean Wave" as a Sign of Global Shift," *Korea Journal*, 45 (4), 147-182.

2. Choi, Sejung Marina, Wei-Na Lee and Hee-Jung Kim (2005), "Lessons from the Rich and Famous: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Celebrity Endorsement in Advertising," *Journal of Advertising*, 34 (2), 85-98.
3. Hofstede, Geertz (1980), *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
4. Hsu, Chung-Kue and Daniella McDonald (2002), "An Examination on Multiple Celebrity Endorsers in Advertising," *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 11 (1), 19-29.
5. McCracken, Grant (1989), "Who is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16 (3), 310-321.
6. Perreault, William D. and Laurence E. Leigh (1989), "Reliability of Nominal Data Based on Qualitative Judgments," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 26 (2), 135-149.
7. Praet, Carolus (2002), "Japanese Advertising, The World's Number One Celebrity Showcase? A Cross-Cultural Comparison of the Frequency of Celebrity Appearances in TV Advertising," in *Asia-Pacific Conference Proceedings of the American Academy of Advertising*, Marilyn S. Roberts and Robert L. King, eds., 32-42.
8. Pringle, Hamish (2004), *Celebrity Sells*. Hoboken, NJ: John, Wiley & Sons, Inc.
9. The World Factbook (2006), available at <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html> (accessed September 15, 2006).
10. Zandpour, Fred, Veronica Campos, Joelle Catalano, Cypress Chang, Young Dae Cho, Renee Hoobayar, Shu-Fang Jiang, Man-Chi Lin, Stan Madrid, Holly Scheideler and Susan Titus Osborn (1994), "Global Reach and Local Touch: Achieving Cultural Fitness in TV Advertising," *Journal of Advertising Research*, 34 (5), 35-63.