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# Right messages for the right site: on-line creative strategies by Japanese multinational corporations

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The aim of this research was to compare the on-line creative strategies of Japanese multinational corporations that are used at home and in foreign markets in the light of the standardization versus localization debate. Product-based websites created by the same Japanese firms were examined in Japan, Spain and the USA using a cross-cultural content analysis research framework. The findings show that Japanese multinational corporations are likely to localize their web communications through tailoring on-line creative strategies according to the target market. Domestically, soft sell approaches are used more than hard sell approaches in Japan, whilst the relation reverses in the USA. Spain equally weighs both approaches. Cross-culturally, while Japan tends to employ soft sell approaches more than the other countries, there is no significant difference across the three countries. On the other hand, the USA significantly differs from the others in terms of the usage of hard sell approaches. The dimension of creative executions in Spain seems more limited.

**KEYWORDS:** Marketing communications; Internet research; content analysis; creative strategies; standardization; Japan

## **INTRODUCTION**

As the Internet rapidly proliferates throughout the world, more and more multinational corporations are drastically shifting from off-line to on-line selling by creating a diverse range of websites in multiple markets (Donthu and Garcia, 1999). By 2001 more than 36 million domains had been created for commercial websites ('dot coms'), with on-line retail spending projected to reach an astonishing \$6.8 trillion by 2004 (Internet Software Consortium, 2001; Forrester, 2002). The Internet can thus be seen as key to the 'global village wonderland', enabling more standardized marketing communications in an interconnected world market based on communication technology (Levitt, 1983). Specifically, product-based websites are replacing traditional off-line shopping

venues, such as mail order catalogues and television-based home shopping, while hosting a new form of global advertising among culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Furthermore, an increase in the quantity as well as the quality of product and brand information on the Internet is generating greater interest among consumers, extending beyond physical boundaries (Donthu and Garcia, 1999). Hence, websites are asserted as the best communication medium for developing a standardized brand image by uniformly blending textual and visual content (Roberts and Ko, 2001).

At the same time multinational corporations are faced with localizing websites because the world does not communicate in one language (Warden *et al.*, 2002). From this perspective establishing localized relationships with international consumers would be best achieved by creating regional web content (Quelch and Klein, 1996). Managerially, however, localizing commercial websites within each region of operation may not be a cost-effective alternative because it would require continual updating of information and motivating viewers' revisits. Such independent maintenance of websites in each region would jeopardize consistent brand strategy in the world market, thereby eliminating 'the advantage of centralized management of a firm's Websites' (Warden *et al.*, 2002, p. 80). Unfortunately, there has been little research on what appears to be a crucial question: whether such commercial websites should be and have been standardized. This general question suggests additional ones.

- (1) What kind of creative executions are used in terms of soft sell versus hard sell approaches?
- (2) Does the home country culture influence this creativity on websites created for foreign markets?

The purpose of this study was to identify the on-line creative strategies used by Japanese multinational corporations in the light of the standardization versus localization debate. In doing so, their product-based websites were examined in Japan, Spain and the USA using a cross-cultural content analysis research framework. The USA represents not only the largest economic partner in Japanese external trade, but also the typical individualistic, low-context culture in the West. Alternatively, Spain plays a central role in Latin/Hispanic markets and lies halfway as a moderately collectivistic culture between Japan and the USA. As shown in Table 1 they clearly differ not only in cultural, economic and geographic dimensions but also in key indicators of the Internet, which are necessary conditions for rendering hypotheses tests valid.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Standardization versus localization**

The issue of standardization arises from the desirability and feasibility concerning the usage of a uniform marketing mix (4Ps) across national markets (Szymanski *et al.*, 1993). Among them, advertising has been an aspect that has been examined more often than the other elements. A 'standardized' approach is the use of uniform messages without the modification of headings, illustrations or copy except translation in international markets (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). This school of thought argues that consumers anywhere in the world are likely to share the same wants and needs (Elinder, 1961; Levitt, 1983). On the other hand a 'localized' approach asserts that consumers differ across countries and, thus, that advertising should be tailored according to culture, media availability, product life cycle stages and industry structure (Wind, 1986; Synodinos *et al.*, 1989). Compromising these two extremes, the third school of thought states that the

**TABLE 1. General characteristics of the countries analysed**

	Japan	Spain	USA
Population <sup>a</sup>	127.4 million	39.4 million	274.9 million
Gross national product per capita <sup>a</sup>	\$30 720	\$14 623	\$33 946
Advertising spending per capita <sup>a</sup>	\$262.60	\$122.80	\$437.60
On-line advertising spend <sup>a</sup>	\$479.7 million	\$170 million	\$8.2 billion
PC ownership (% of total population) <sup>b</sup>	46.4	14.2	57.8
Web penetration (% of total population) <sup>b</sup>	27.5	17.3	58.6
Web purchase rate (% of total users) <sup>b</sup>	16	9.4	39.1

<sup>a</sup>Source: 1999 data (*Advertising Age*, 2001).

<sup>b</sup>2001 data based on *Net Figures*, *Nielsen/NetRatings* and *NetValue* (Net Profit, 2002).

appropriateness of standardization depends on economic similarity, market position, product nature, the environment and organizational factors (Jain, 1989).

Empirical evidence in the 1970s showed a high degree of localization due to increasing nationalistic forces as well as the well-publicized advertising blunders during the 1960s (Agrawal, 1995). This trend reversed towards standardization in the 1980s, in accordance with a drastic increase in multinational advertising agencies (Yin, 1999). A series of content analysis studies were conducted during this period that attempted to identify cross-cultural differences between Japanese and American advertising (Madden *et al.*, 1986; Hong *et al.*, 1987; Mueller, 1987).

In the 1990s the localization seemed to remain popular among multinational corporations operating in various regions of world markets. Harris (1994) found that 69% of 38 multinational corporations (19 American and 19 European) standardized their advertising campaign to some extent throughout the European Community markets, whilst the rest of the sample localized. Interestingly, only 8% of the sample used totally standardized advertising, providing 'little evidence of any widespread practice of standardized pan-European advertising campaigns' (Harris, 1994, p. 21). Kanso and Nelson (2002) contended that 62% of 193 firms (both American and non-American subsidiaries) in Finland and Sweden used localization, placing a strong emphasis on local cultures. Similarly, both Tai (1997) and Yin (1999) found that the deeply rooted Chinese culture motivated international marketing executives towards localization in China.

Studies concerning Japanese multinational corporations' standardization practices are extremely scarce. Yamaki (1992) examined 77 Japanese multinational corporations in terms of their marketing decision making. He found that, although 36.4% of the sample answered that the headquarters took overall control over international advertising campaigns, 11.7%, which were largely 'successful' companies such as Sony, Honda, Panasonic and Seiko, tended to delegate authority to foreign affiliates. In a comparative content analysis of Japanese multinational corporations' print advertisements used in Indonesia, Spain and the USA, Graham *et al.* (1993) reported that Japanese firms were likely to localize marketing communications by tailoring their information content according to the target market. Nishimoto (1992) contended that Japanese firms tend to refrain from using 'Japanese-flavoured' expressions in overseas campaigns so as to avoid cultural conflicts with local consumers, whilst all respondents agreed with the use of uniform logos and symbols in international markets. Echoing this observation, Manabe and Holst (2000) argued that Japanese multinational corporations were prone to conceal their national identity with attempts to localize their advertising content in Germany.

## **Creative strategies in marketing communications**

Over the past decade a number of studies have made valuable contributions to the understanding of the cross-cultural factors influencing the standardization decision in terms of the use of creative strategies. 'Creative strategy' can be defined as 'a policy or guiding principle, which specifies the general nature and character of the messages to be designed' (Frazer, 1983, p. 36). In this light, prior research works concerning the international advertising practices of multinational corporations 'have differentiated between the basic sales message and the creative expression or context, and have argued that the former is more likely to be standardized than the latter' (Harris, 1994, p. 16).

Simon (1971) developed his classification scheme consisting of ten creative strategies, such as 'information', 'argument', 'motivation with psychological appeals', etc. He argued that such strategies are supposed to 'activate' consumers to purchase through their exposure to advertising. Using this typology, Martenson (1987) identified that American commercials employed more 'brand familiarization' and 'symbolic association' strategies than did Swedish cinema advertisements. Similarly, Zandpour *et al.* (1994) and Zandpour and Harich (1996) carried out a series of multicultural studies, reporting that American television commercials are likely to transmit explicit verbal arguments based on specific consumer needs, while Japanese and Spanish samples are likely to use softer strategies, such as 'motivation with psychological appeals' and 'symbolic association'. In contrast, Oh *et al.* (1999) applied this scheme to the Internet and found no significant differences in the creative strategies used in American and Korean target advertisements.

In an analysis of television commercials, Laskey *et al.* (1989) suggested a dichotomy of informational and transformational strategies, which are further classified into nine creative strategies. Adopting this typology, Ramaprasad and Hasegawa (1992) found no significant difference between American and Japanese print advertisements. However, Tanaka *et al.* (1998) contended that the creative strategies in television commercials used in Japan, Thailand, Singapore and the USA were notably different. In her comparative analysis of web advertising in the USA, the UK and South Korea, Ju-Pak (1999) posited that American market samples are more likely to contain factual or informational visuals than their Korean and British counterparts, whilst Korean on-line advertisements use symbolic or transformational visuals more than the ones in the USA and UK.

### **Key concept: cultural context and marketing communications**

The preceding discussion on creative strategy leads to a conclusion that, whereas the Japanese lay a special emphasis on subtlety, the Americans prefer direct and explicit messages. Such differences are closely linked with their distinct interpersonal communication styles, particularly in terms of high versus low cultural context. Here, 'context' can be defined as the degree to which communicators rely on prior knowledge about the subject under discussion. In a high-context culture, such as Japan and Spain, explicit and direct communication styles are relatively rare, giving preference to implicit, ambiguous and non-verbal communication on strong interdependent relationships. Alternatively, in a low-context culture, such as the USA, clear and direct verbal expressions are commonly found due to independent self-assertion (Hall, 1976).

As De Mooij (1998) suggested, in a high-context culture advertisers tend to employ soft sell approaches as opposed to the hard sell approaches commonly used in a low-context culture. Generally, international marketers tend to combine both soft and hard sell approaches so as to maximize consumers' preferences, comprehension and responses in a given market. 'Soft sell' approaches emphasize creating a mood or an atmosphere rather than highlighting product features through

the use of human emotional sentiments. Johansson (1994) argued that 'Western observers of TV advertising in Japan are frequently struck by the soft-sell, fantasy oriented approach' (p. 17). In addition, many researchers have pointed out that Japanese marketers have no trust in emphatic selling demonstrations with logical exposure of product merits in favour of intuitive communications (Lazer *et al.*, 1985; Mueller 1992; Lin, 1993). In contrast, 'hard sell' approaches prioritize sales competitiveness and stress brand names and product recommendations (Mueller, 1987). This is effective in the USA where argumentation and persuasiveness based on facts and data are the most effective advertising styles because of the strong focus on verbal communication (De Mooij, 1998).

The examination of high- versus low-context communication in on-line environments seems very sketchy. The authors found only one study that experimentally compared perceptions of Australian and Malaysian subjects towards high- versus low-context websites (Fink and Laupase, 2000). However, this experiment did not find any significant difference due to the small sample size. Furthermore, no single study has examined the on-line creative strategies in Japan, Spain and the USA.

## **HYPOTHESES**

Although generalization should be avoided for the overall on-line environment, product-based websites can be seen as an interactive part of the 'overall localized, regionalized or worldwide strategic communication efforts' of multinational corporations (Roberts and Ko, 2001). Their target audience is potential 'Internet shoppers': impulsive and innovative convenience seekers, who are better educated and more affluent than non-on-line shoppers, with a positive attitude towards direct marketing and advertising (Donthu and Garcia, 1999). Such uniform consumer characteristics on the Internet may lead to common product needs and perceptions, which are essential conditions for standardizing marketing communications (Jain, 1989).

Furthermore, as the USA, Western Europe and Japan constitute the major part of the world economy, those consumers appear to be becoming fairly homogeneous (Ohmae, 1985). In fact, prior research has suggested the benefits of standardizing their marketing mix across the USA and Western European markets are because 'the strength and form of the relationships between the various marketing mix, other competitive strategy, market structure and business performance factors are relatively similar' (Szymanski *et al.*, 1993, p. 11).

However, 'cultural baggage is as relevant in cyberspace as it is on paper and ink' (Cutitta, 1998, p. 158). As the Internet has been seen as a medium for the formation and maintenance of interpersonal communication, the context of culture should still be taken into consideration in the on-line environment (Ramirez *et al.*, 2002). Hence, Japanese multinational corporations need to adapt their linguistic as well as cultural uniqueness into local market conditions in order to avoid 'communication mismatch': the ambiguous and implicit nature of high-context communication could hardly persuade rational and explicit Western consumers. In this vein, collective evidence in the preceding literature review seems to provide convincing reasons towards the localization of successful Japanese multinational corporations: using local agencies (Yamaki, 1992), avoiding uniquely Japanese expression (Nishimoto, 1992; Manabe and Holst, 2000) and tailoring product information content (Graham *et al.*, 1993). This evidence also explains the weakness of Japanese agencies in foreign markets, in contrast to their corresponding strength at home (Johansson, 1994). Therefore, it is reasonable to postulate that Japanese multinational corporations tend to localize their on-line creative strategies across external markets. On the basis of these backgrounds, five hypotheses and two research questions are formulated in order to test

the summary perspectives on the relationship between the cultural context and on-line creative strategies adopted by Japanese multinational corporations empirically.

First, according to Yamaki's (1992) findings, it is reasonable to assume that Japanese multinational corporations' websites are produced by Japanese agencies at home, not by local agencies in overseas markets. This suggests that a high-context side of interpersonal communication or soft sell approaches will appear more clearly in the Japanese market samples.

H<sub>1</sub>: The frequency of usage of 'soft sell' approaches will be greater than that of 'hard sell' approaches in the Japanese market samples.

Second, with respect to Spain, a series of studies carried out by Zandpour *et al.* (1994) and Zandpour and Harich (1996) provided strong evidence for a high-context nature of Spanish marketing communication (i.e. emotional and non-verbal).

H<sub>2</sub>: The frequency of usage of 'soft sell' approaches will be greater than that of 'hard sell' approaches in the Spanish market samples.

Third, prior research has indicated that American marketing communication is believed as most vividly illustrating hard sell approaches, with soft sell approaches less emphasized (De Mooij, 1998).

H<sub>3</sub>: The frequency of usage of 'hard sell' approaches will be greater than that of 'soft sell' approaches in the American market samples.

Fourth, looking at the cross-cultural differences it is reasonable to assume that Japanese multinational corporations will use soft sell approaches more often at home, while adopting hard sell approaches more in the American market. In fact, neither consumers nor advertisers in Japan favourably accept hard sell approaches because they provoke rather offensive or confrontational images of the firms in Japan, whereas such hard-hitting sales orientation is indispensable in the USA (Lazer *et al.*, 1985; Mueller, 1992). Between these two extremes, a moderate combination of soft and hard sell approaches may be used in the Spanish market. The following hypotheses are posited on the basis of these assertions.

H<sub>4</sub>: A higher percentage of the Japanese market samples will employ 'soft sell' approaches than do the American and Spanish market samples.

H<sub>5</sub>: A higher percentage of the American market samples will employ 'hard sell' approaches than do the Japanese and Spanish market samples.

Finally, two additional research questions are posed in order to explore the descriptive aspects of the study thesis further.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are the differences and similarities in Japanese multinational corporations' on-line creative strategies across markets?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the factors influencing Japanese multinational corporations' on-line creative strategies across markets?

## METHODOLOGY

Content analysis was chosen as the method of analysis as it is commonly regarded as a useful measurement technique in social science studies, including web communication research (McMillan, 2000; Okazaki and Alonso, 2002).

## Data collection

An information set comprised of Japanese multinational corporations' websites was created, each of which 'advertised' one specific product common in Japan, Spain and the USA (e.g. Nikon's digital camera on Japanese, Spanish and American sites). First, 50 listed companies were singled out from an on-line database of the Tokyo Stock Exchange during the second week of August in 2001 according to the following criteria (Root, 1994).

- (1) A parent company engages in foreign production through its affiliates located in more than five countries.
- (2) A parent company exercises direct control over the policies of its affiliates.
- (3) A parent company implements business strategies in production, marketing, finance and staffing that transcend national boundaries.
- (4) A parent company possesses home pages in Japan, Spain and the USA.

Therefore, there was no sampling procedure because only 50 listed companies satisfied these conditions. Next, one specific product was chosen for each of these firms, which resulted in a total of 150 websites for analysis (i.e. 50 products multiplied by three countries). Table 2 lists all 50 Japanese multinational corporations chosen in this procedure. The unit of analysis was defined as a product-based website examining up to level 2 of the hierarchy that was accessible via hyperlinks, that is when no relevant information was found on the first sites, they were allowed to click hyperlinks once in order to access the next level of hierarchy. The unit included textual information, video, audio, graphics and animation, but banner advertisements and pop-up messaging were excluded from the analysis. The reason for not including these as units of analysis is that the main purpose of both banner advertisements and pop-ups is to catch consumers' attention, which means they do not contain enough visual or verbal material to allow a meaningful analysis (Ju-Pak, 1999; Oh *et al.*, 1999). All samples were chosen during the second week of August in 2001.

## Coding scheme

The classification system for on-line creative strategies was derived by adaptation from an exhaustive literature review on previous typology systems in an attempt to capture generic as well as specific strategies in on-line marketing communication. First, the measure of overall strategies was based on Simon's (1971) four categories, which were regrouped into 'emotional/psychological appeals', 'brand repetition and familiarization', 'symbolic or visual metaphor' and 'habit starting by trials/simulations'. Second and of direct interest to this study, 15 web-specific creative strategies for web advertising were chosen from recent advertising literature: 'banner messages', 'icons with hyperlinks', 'curiosity arousal', 'electronic coupons', 'electronic feedback, inquiries or comments', 'electronic form survey', 'entertainment', 'keyword search', 'multimedia shows', 'on-line games', 'on-line problem diagnostics', 'personal registration', 'personal choice helper', 'software download' and 'sweepstakes/prizes' (e.g. Ghose and Dou, 1998; Ha and James, 1998; Leogn *et al.*, 1998).

In an effort to maximize the mutually exclusive categories that reflect the nature of product-based websites, electronic feedback, inquiries or comments, electronic form survey and personal registration were grouped into a more general category called 'interactive communication', personal choice helper, on-line problem diagnostics and keyword search were classed as 'personalized choice/attention', electronic coupon, software download and sweepstakes/prizes were categorized as 'special incentives' and, finally, banner messages, icons with hyperlinks, multimedia shows and on-line games were labelled 'curiosity arousal'.



**TABLE 2. Japanese multinationals examined in this study**

Product category	%	Japanese multinationals
Household electronic appliances	18	Brother, Daikin, Hitachi, JVC, Mitsubishi Electronic, Panasonic, Pioneer, Sony and Sanyo
Electronics and equipment	20	Epson, Fujitsu, Icom, Kyocera, Mitsumi, NEC, Oki, Ricoh, Sharp and Toshiba
Cameras and videos	12	Canon, Fuji Film, Konica, Minolta, Nikon and Pentax
Industrial product	16	Ebara, Koyo, NCR, NSK, Omron, Sakata Inx, YKK and Yokogawa
Automobile and accessories	18	Bridgestone, Honda, Isuzu, Kubota, Mazda, Mitsubishi Motors, Nissan, Suzuki and Toyota
Musical instruments	4	Kenwood and Roland
Home entertainment supplies	4	Bandai and Nintendo
Clocks and watches	4	Casio and Citizen
Miscellaneous	4	Hoya and Japan Air Line

Last, three categories were added to include ‘entertainment’ and ‘celebrity endorsement’, which have been identified as the most common advertising strategies in Japanese advertisements (Lin, 1993; De Mooij, 1998). In addition, ‘comparison’ was considered in order to identify cross-cultural differences between soft sell versus hard sell approaches.

### Judging creative executions

This typology consisting of 12 on-line creative strategies was further scrutinized by expert judges for the classification of soft sell versus hard sell approaches in the on-line environment. Six expert judges from two large-scale universities in Spain were selected to serve on an on-line panel. They were provided information associated with the basic definitions of classification schemes with illustrating samples by e-mail. After explanatory sessions they were asked to classify the 12 on-line creative strategies into hard sell or soft sell approaches in nature. This procedure resulted in the following two major categories.

- (1) Soft sell approaches: celebrity endorsement, curiosity arousal, emotional/psychological appeals, entertainment and symbolic/visual metaphors.
- (2) Hard sell approaches: brand repetition/familiarization, comparison, habit starting by trials/simulations, rational reasoning and special incentives.

However, a general consensus was not achieved regarding two categories, interactive communication and personalized choice/attention, because the majority of the expert judges claimed that they are specific strategies for the on-line environment. Thus, it was decided to include these categories in the umbrella named ‘web-specific approaches’.

Operationalizations of all the variables are shown in Table 3. It was considered that the decision on selling approaches was not a dichotomous one between complete soft sell and hard sell. Rather, they differed in degree. The frequency of occurrence of these categories was treated as the dependent variables in this study. The coding instruments, which were originally prepared in English, were translated into Japanese and Spanish using the back translation technique (Brislin, 1980). Each typology was supplemented with additional examples to give a better illustration.

**TABLE 3. Operationalizations of on-line creative strategies**

Categories	Operationalizations
Comparison	Two or more named or recognizable brands of the same product class are compared and the comparison is made in terms of one or more of the product's attributes to claim complete or partial superiority
Interactive communication	Customers' active responses are encouraged through e-mailing, questionnaires or data registration devices
Entertainment	Characteristic features and benefits of the advertiser's goods are explained via the usage of humour, amusement, parody or caricature in order to please consumers
Curiosity arousal	On-line games, videos, drawings, photos, animations, etc., are used to draw the consumers' attention (i.e., 'eye-catchers')
Special incentives	Prizes, gifts or coupons are given and contests are held so as to incite consumers to gain access to products and services
Habit-starting by trials or simulations <sup>a</sup>	Regular or 'routine' usage of the advertiser's goods is encouraged through a free sample, trial, reduced price offer, technical simulation, etc.
Emotional or psychological appeals <sup>a</sup>	Consumers' buying decisions are stimulated via positive or negative emotions such as love, hatred, desire, joy, sadness, admiration, sorrow, etc.
Symbolic or visual metaphor <sup>a</sup>	The advertiser's goods are linked to symbols and visual images of a place, event or person that provide positive insight into the expressions of advertising
Personalized choice/attention	This function allows consumers to pinpoint the particular information which interests them or, alternately, to identify their problems and access 'trouble shooting' suggestions
Rational reasoning	Characteristic features and benefits of the advertiser's goods are explained in a logical and persuasive manner
Celebrity endorsement	Famous actors, singers, models, sports stars or comedians are used for creating a positive image for a company or its products through association with their image
Brand repetition and familiarization <sup>a</sup>	The advertiser repeats the brand's name or one basic piece of information in messages to provoke 'loyalty' to and 'trustworthiness' of the brand

<sup>a</sup>Based on Simon (1971) and Martenson (1987).

# Coding procedure

Two native judges, both of whom were unaware of the purpose of the study, were hired for each country and first trained to grasp the operational definitions of all the variables. The coders were asked to identify the presence of one or more cues for on-line creative strategies in each website during the coding procedure, regardless of soft sell, hard sell or web-specific approaches. All disagreements between judges were resolved through discussion so as to lend the tests higher reliability. All coding tasks were completed by the second week of October in 2001.

A reliability index suggested by Perreault and Leigh (1989) was used for calculating the inter-judge agreement. One of the authors independently evaluated the same sample for all the variables at the end of the coding procedure. These results were then compared item by item with those obtained by the judges (Table 4). The majority of the reliability indexes exceeded 0.76, which is slightly lower than the minimum value of 0.80 recommended by Perreault and Leigh (1989). However, they were determined to be satisfactory, particularly in the light of the difficulty involved in coding non-verbal dimensions.

# RESULTS

## Hypothesis testing

This paper's primary arguments claim that, because differences in interpersonal communication style project the on-line environment, the on-line creative strategies used by Japanese multinational corporations should differ, both within each country and across the countries.

Hypotheses 1–3 address the former in that each country market sample should reflect different usage patterns of on-line creative strategies in terms of soft sell versus hard sell approaches. In order to answer these hypotheses the frequency of on-line creative strategies was treated as numerical data, which represents the 'degree' of soft sell or hard sell. That is, the number of soft sell approaches, without distinguishing the type of on-line creative strategies, was counted and totalled for each multinational corporation analysed, designating one numerical value per website. The same procedure was repeated for hard sell approaches. Finally, a one-way ANOVA was applied for examining whether there were significant differences between the mean numbers of soft sell and hard sell approaches within the country. Table 5 summarizes the results of the ANOVA for differences between the means of soft sell versus hard sell approaches.

Looking at the rows, the Japanese market sample used more soft sell approaches ( $F = 3.012$  and  $p = 0.086$ ) than hard sell approaches. Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported. In contrast, because

**TABLE 4. Reliability index ( $I_r$ )**

	Two native coders	Final coder and the author
Japan	0.80	0.79
Spain	0.77	0.78
USA	0.79	0.81

$I_r = \{[(F/N - (1/k))][k/k - 1]\}^5$  for  $F/N \geq 1/k$  and  $I_r = 0$  for  $F/N \leq 1/k$  where  $F$  is the observed frequency,  $N$  is the sample size and  $F/N$  is the percentage of agreement. All values are based on the means of the reliability indexes calculated for each of the 12 on-line creative strategies.

**TABLE 5. Means of soft sell versus hard sell approaches per product-based website**

	Soft sell	Hard sell	F-value <sup>a</sup>	p-value
Japan	1.200	0.860	3.01	0.086
Spain	0.780	0.860	0.26	0.612
USA	0.960	1.740	14.12	0.000
F-value <sup>b</sup>	2.010	19.437	—	—
p-value	0.138	0.000	—	—

Sample sizes: Japan, Spain and the USA  $n = 50$ . The values reported are means and  $F$ - and  $p$ -values.

<sup>a</sup>The degrees of freedom for univariate  $F = 1,98$ .

<sup>b</sup>The degree of freedom for univariate  $F = 2,147$ .

the Spanish market sample is statistically indifferent in terms of the usage of soft sell versus hard sell approaches hypothesis 2 is rejected. With regard to the American market sample, the frequency of usage of hard sell approaches was significantly greater than that of soft sell approaches ( $F = 14.123$  and  $p = 0.000$ ). This finding lends support for hypothesis 3.

Next, hypotheses 4 and 5 deal with this same dichotomy but across the three markets. A one-way ANOVA was performed for the numerical data obtained for soft sell versus hard sell approaches in Japan, Spain and the USA in order to examine these hypotheses. Table 5 shows these results in the columns. As clearly seen, the difference in soft sell approaches across countries was not statistically significant ( $F = 2.008$  and  $p = 0.138$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 5 is rejected. With regard to hard sell approaches, the data indicate that the usage level is practically equal in the Japanese and Spanish market samples, while being notably high in the American market samples. The difference across countries was statistically significant ( $F = 19.437$  and  $p = 0.000$ ), which supports hypothesis 5.

### Cross-cultural differences across the markets

Next, both research questions 1 and 2 address descriptive aspects of the on-line creative strategies used by Japanese multinational corporations in an on-line environment. First, in order to answer research question 1,  $\chi^2$  analysis of variance was used for comparing the relative frequency of the on-line creative strategies used in the three countries. The results in Table 6 show significant differences for all but three of the categories, those being comparison, special incentives and celebrity endorsement.

In general, it seems clear that the three market samples exhibited distinct patterns in their usage. The Japanese market samples were more likely to use curiosity arousal and symbolic/visual metaphor more often than the other two market samples, while employing none of the hard sell approaches prominently. In addition, despite statistical insignificance across countries, celebrity endorsement appeared only in the Japanese market sample. On the other hand, the Spanish and American market samples used emotional/psychological appeals and rational reasoning much more than their Japanese counterparts. The American market samples tended to use entertainment much more often than the others did. Interestingly, brand repetition/familiarization appeared very often in both the Japanese and American market samples, but not in the Spanish market samples. With regard to web-specific approaches, both strategies (i.e. interactive communication and personalized choice/attention) were used most frequently in the American market samples.

**TABLE 6. On-line creative strategies used by Japanese multinational corporations**

Approaches	On-line creative strategies	Japan		Spain		USA		$\chi^2$ (df = 2)
		n	%	n	%	n	%	
Soft sell	Celebrity endorsement	8	6.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	16.90
	Curiosity arousal	27	20.6	9	7.2	5	2.5	27.66***
	Entertainment	9	6.9	5	4.0	22	11.0	17.32***
	Emotional/Psychological appeals	4	3.1	21	16.8	21	10.5	18.12***
	Symbolic/Visual metaphor	12	9.2	4	3.2	0	0.0	15.67***
Hard sell	Brand repetition/familiarization	14	10.7	1	0.8	20	10.0	21.09***
	Comparison	2	1.5	3	2.4	7	3.5	3.80
	Habit starting by trials/simulations	9	6.9	0	0.0	7	3.5	9.38***
	Rational reasoning	12	9.2	36	28.8	44	22.0	46.78***
	Special incentives	6	4.6	3	2.4	9	4.5	3.41
Web specific	Interactive communication	16	12.2	25	20.0	33	16.5	11.58***
	Personalized choice/attention	12	9.2	18	14.4	32	16.0	17.38***

Sample sizes: Japan  $n = 131$ , Spain  $n = 125$  and USA  $n = 200$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Table 7 indicates the results of a pairwise  $\chi^2$  analysis between the two market samples. Interestingly, the difference was larger between home versus host country markets than between host versus host country markets. Significant differences were found in six categories between Japan and Spain and in seven categories between Japan and the USA, while only three categories were statistically different between Spain and the USA.

### Factors influencing on-line creative executions

Finally, with regard to research question 2, a factor analysis was applied in order to identify a likely combination of the on-line creative strategies used by the Japanese multinational corporations in the three market samples. The correlation of the occurrence was calculated in a cross-tabulation for each pair of categories (e.g. the occurrence of both comparison and interactive communication, comparison and curiosity arousal and so forth) and the resultant factor matrix was rotated using Varimax rotation. Only those factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1.00 were retained.

Three major factors were revealed with regard to the Japanese market sample, explaining approximately 50% of the total variance. Factor 1 comprised three significant loadings, namely celebrity endorsement, entertainment (which fell under the umbrella of soft sell approaches) and curiosity arousal (web-specific approaches), factor 2 comprised two, namely habit starting by trials/simulations and brand repetition and familiarization (hard sell approaches) and factor 3 comprised two, namely interactive communication (web-specific approaches) and symbolic or visual metaphor (soft sell approaches).

The factor analysis detected two major factors in the Spanish market sample. Four significant loadings were found for factor 1, namely rational reasoning (hard sell approaches), emotional/psychological appeals, entertainment (soft sell approaches) and curiosity arousal (web-specific approaches) and two were found for factor 2, namely interactive communication and personalized choice/attention (web-specific approaches).

**TABLE 7. Pairwise  $\chi^2$  analysis of on-line creative strategies**

Approaches	On-line creative strategies	$\chi^2$ (df = 1)		
		Japan versus Spain	Japan versus USA	Spain versus USA
Soft sell	Celebrity endorsement	8.70	8.70	0.00
	Curiosity arousal	14.06***	22.24***	1.33
	Entertainment	1.33	7.90***	14.66***
	Emotional/Psychological appeals	15.41***	15.41***	0.00
	Symbolic/Visual metaphor	4.76**	13.64***	4.17
Hard sell	Brand repetition/familiarization	13.25***	1.60	21.76***
	Comparison	0.21	3.05	1.78
	Habit starting by trials/simulations	9.89	0.30	7.53
	Rational reasoning	23.08***	41.56***	4.00
	Special incentives	1.10	0.71	3.41
Web specific	Interactive communication	3.35*	11.56***	2.63
	Personalized choice/attention	1.71	16.23***	7.84***

Sample sizes: Japan  $n = 131$ , Spain  $n = 125$  and USA  $n = 200$ .

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Three major factors were identified with the American market sample. Four major loadings were revealed for factor 1, namely emotional/psychological appeals, entertainment (soft sell approaches), brand repetition and familiarization (hard sell approaches) and curiosity arousal (web-specific approaches), three were revealed for factor 2, namely comparison, habit starting by trials/simulations and rational reasoning (hard sell approaches) and two were revealed for factor 3, namely interactive communication and special incentives (web-specific approaches). Table 8 summarizes the results of the factor analyses conducted in this section.

## LIMITATIONS

In interpreting the findings of this study, several limitations should be recognized in order to provide a balanced discussion. First, a general problem of content analysis restricts interpretation and discussion of the findings to its manifest patterns without revealing the underlying decision process. Second, taking into account the diverse range of information involved, it should be admitted that there was certain ambiguity in determining the unit of analysis examined. In particular, other spatial (e.g. more levels of hierarchy, etc.) and technical (e.g. Java, Shockwave, etc.) dimensions of the web medium should be examined in the future. Third, this study did not consider other environmental factors that may influence standardization decisions, such as legal restrictions, agency selection, product life cycles, etc. A broader range of these explanatory variables should be incorporated in future research in order to render the findings more reliable and applicable to actual market conditions. Lastly, this study did not control for product classification due to a limited sample size. Future research should consider replicating the current study but take into account a broader range of products or be restricted to a single product category in order to test the differences in the on-line creative strategies used in different product categories.

**TABLE 8. Summary of the factor analyses**

Country	Primary factors		Secondary factors		Tertiary factors
Japan	Soft sell approaches Curiosity arousal  Entertainment Celebrity endorsement	⇒	Hard sell approaches Habit starting  Brand repetition/familiarization	⇒	Soft sell approaches Interactive communication Symbolic/Visual metaphor
Spain	Soft sell approaches Curiosity arousal Entertainment Emotional/psychological appeals Rational reasoning	⇒	Web-specific approaches Interactive communication Personalized choice/attention		NA
USA	Soft sell approaches Curiosity arousal  Entertainment Emotional/psychological appeals Brand repetition/familiarization	⇒	Hard sell approaches Comparison  Habit starting Rational reasoning	⇒	Web-specific approaches Interactive communication Special incentives

Extraction method: principal component analysis.  
Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization.

## CONCLUSIONS

A number of statistically significant differences were found in the on-line creative strategies used in Japanese multinational corporations' product-based websites in Japan, Spain and the USA. Despite the benefits associated with the standardization, the results of this study suggest that Japanese multinational corporations appear to localize their on-line creative strategies according to the target markets, which is consistent with this paper's hypothesized direction.

First, domestically, this research's hypotheses testing shows that the mean number of soft sell approaches was significantly greater than that of hard sell approaches in Japan, while this relation was reversed in the USA. With regard to Spain, a similar level of soft sell and hard sell approaches was used. Being aware of the danger of sweeping generalization, this finding seems to be at least consistent with prior research on traditional media: the high versus low context of communication could be reflected in commercial websites.

Cross-culturally, the ANOVA detected significant difference across the three markets only in the usage of hard sell approaches, but not in that of soft sell approaches. However, the  $\chi^2$  analysis of variance indicated a significant difference in all but three strategies. Further, those three strategies in which no significant difference occurred were also those used infrequently across all countries. For example, celebrity endorsement was used only in Japan, but the difference was statistically insignificant because of too few observed occurrences. In addition, the pairwise  $\chi^2$  analysis indicated significant differences in as many as six and seven categories between Japan and Spain and between Japan and the USA, respectively. That is, the overall strategies used in the external markets were in fact very different from those used at home.

Second, with regard to the Japanese market sample, despite the predominance of soft sell approaches, entertainment and emotional/psychological appeals were used much less at home. In particular, the use of emotional/psychological appeals was surprisingly low. This contradicts the widely accepted view on the Japanese preference for high emotionality in the advertising literature (e.g. Hong *et al.*, 1987; Mueller 1987; Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992). In this light, Johansson (1994) predicted that Japanese marketing communications will be much less entertaining and more attribute oriented in the future, the reason for this being that drastic socioeconomic changes in the late 1990s, i.e. prolonged economic recession and increasingly personalized lifestyles, would force advertisement agencies to 'give up competing clients in order to engage more intensively in hard-hitting battles of words aimed at getting individuals to process information instead of enjoying the fantasy' (p. 25). This contention particularly makes sense for the Internet, which is perhaps the most symbolic product of social and economic modernization. With the commercial functions guiding the basic content of product-based websites, Japanese firms may have stressed more attention-getting presentations of the products at the cost of traditional Japanese appeals. More effort is needed in the next decade in order to examine this proposition, whether cultural traditions will dictate a softer style of creative executions or whether they are moving to a more hard-hitting presentation of benefits in the Japanese on-line environment.

Third, another interesting observation is that the frequency of usage of symbolic and visual metaphors differed significantly according to the target country. This may have been due to the fact that the Japanese orthographic system uses ideographs called *Kanji*, which were originally based on Chinese characters. Unlike the phonetic writing system of the Roman-based alphabet, *Kanjis* are characters that have meaning as opposed to alphabets that only represent sounds. The graphic quality of *Kanji* plays an important role in advertising expressions because each character is a visual symbol that represents a concept (Mukai, 1991). Thus, the meaning is transmitted and received as a pictorial image through indirect creative strategies in Japan (Camargo, 1986).



Consequently, the preference for symbolism has often been cited as the principal characteristic of Japanese marketing communications (Lazer *et al.*, 1985; Hong *et al.*, 1987).

Fourth, as shown in Table 8, the factor analyses indicated that Japanese multinational corporations commonly tend to combine soft sell as well as hard sell approaches in all three markets, while placing a primary emphasis on soft sell approaches. Among them, as seen in the  $\chi^2$  analyses, emotional/psychological appeals was the most influencing factor in the Spanish and American market samples. Such a finding agrees with Kilburn (1987) who reported a worldwide tendency to value affective content in marketing communications. Furthermore, it should be noted that entertainment and interactive communication were identified as determinant factors of all market samples, being consistent with a view that these factors comprise principal gratifications of Internet usage. From the psychological and behavioural perspectives, it is pointed out that interactivity is regarded as one of the most effective on-line functions, while Internet users tend to seek entertainment and relaxation (Ha and James, 1998; Roberts and Ko, 2001).

It seems that the dimension of creative executions used in the Spanish market sample was more limited. Looking at Table 3, the majority of the frequencies of on-line creative strategies identified in Spain were concentrated in four categories (interactive communication, emotional/psychological appeals, personalized choice/attention and rational reasoning), while more diverse patterns were observed in Japan and the USA. This may be partially attributable to the fact that several multinational corporations (e.g. Bandai, Bridgestone, Casio, Hitachi, etc.) have 'regionalized' their European sites and their frontal pages offer a main menu in English leading to local language options with identical contents. Generally, it appears that such websites rely heavily on 'document localization' (i.e. accurate translation), which is more information oriented with a minimum of creative executions.

Finally, this study provides meaningful insights into international web communication practices, indicating that cultural impediments continue to be high even in an on-line environment, as documented in studies concerning off-line advertising standardization (Yin, 1999; Kano and Nelson, 2002). While obviously not conclusive, the evidence from this study suggests that intercultural communication barriers may be one of the most influencing factors in executional/creative standardization decisions in commercial websites. As Japanese, Spanish and American enterprises continue to interweave one another in their competitive markets, a much fuller understanding of the cultural environments will be needed in the planning and implementation of web communication strategies.

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