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# Evolution in the usage of localised appeals in Japanese and American print advertising

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Based on global consumer culture theory, this empirical investigation examines how the usage of local appeals in Japanese and American advertising content has shifted over a period of nearly three decades. It replicates and improves upon Mueller's investigation (*Journal of Advertising Research*, 1987, 27(3)). Content analysis determined the existence or absence of five traditionally Japanese appeals vs five traditionally Western appeals in 2005 issues of women's, general interest, business and sports magazines published in each country. A total of 899 US ads and 853 Japanese ads were collected. Japanese advertisers appear to have turned to a rather more direct and persuasive selling approach, but continue to maintain a tradition of Japanese subtlety. American ads have shifted from a hard-hitting and aggressive strategy to a more benefit-orientated strategy with a distinctly softer touch. Appeals employed, however, were found to vary with the product category promoted. Overall, findings suggest that while Japanese advertising may have become somewhat more 'American', American advertising appears to have become significantly more 'Japanese'. Possible future convergence between Eastern and Western advertising has implications for international marketers as they craft messages to appeal to these audiences.

## **Values and advertising**

A value is defined as 'an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an alternate mode of conduct or end-state of existence' (Rokeach 1968, p. 129). Values guide our attitudes, judgements and ultimately our actions. A culture's values are transmitted by a variety of sources (family, media, school, church

and state), and tend to be broad-based, enduring and relatively stable (Samovar *et al.* 1998). However, cultures are dynamic systems that do not exist in a vacuum, and thus are subject to change. And, because cultures change, so also do the values of those cultures. Pollay (1983) notes that a society's set of values, though resistant to change, has never been totally stable over time. The value system of every culture is open to influences from other value systems and a given society may spread its own influences abroad, as well (Gudykunst *et al.* 1996). This occurs because the world continues to globalise (Holt *et al.* 2004). Globalisation is due to a number of factors, including increasingly interconnected economic systems, advances in telecommunication technologies and the internet, and the growth of global media, as well as increased world travel. Some have even suggested that homogenisation of cultures is characteristic of globalisation (Friedman 2000).

Values pervade all aspects of society – and advertising is no exception (Beatty *et al.* 1985). Over the past several decades, a multitude of investigations analysing the role of values in advertising have been published. The bulk of these empirical works generally fall into one (or more) of three broad categories (Hetsroni 2000).

1. The values portrayed in current advertising versus the values portrayed in advertisements of the past. Here the focus is on whether the dominance of certain values has changed over time. Often in such studies, US advertising serves as a point of comparison (Mueller 1992; Cheng 1994; Wang *et al.* 1997).
2. The values portrayed in the advertising of one country or culture versus those portrayed in another (Miracle *et al.* 1992; Cheng & Schweitzer 1996; Lin 2001).
3. The values portrayed in advertising as opposed to the values held by the public. The core question in these investigations is whether advertising shapes or reflects societal values (Pollay 1986, 1987; Pollay & Gallagher 1990).

## **Global consumer culture theory**

Numerous advertising researchers have insisted that cultural values are at the core of advertising messages, and have long argued that advertising

messages should be congruent with the values of the local culture (Buzzell 1968; Hornick 1980; Harris 1984; Belk *et al.* 1985; Boddewyn *et al.* 1986). Indeed, a number of empirical investigations have supported the position that advertisements reflecting local cultural values are more persuasive than those that ignore them (Madden *et al.* 1986; Han & Shavitt 1994; Gregory & Munch 1997; Taylor *et al.* 1997).

However, Alden *et al.* (1999) propose that increasing globalisation has led to the emergence of a 'global consumer culture'. The authors suggest that a new brand positioning strategy, 'global consumer culture positioning' (GCCP), will resonate with increasingly global segments of consumers in countries around the world – such as teens, the elite and businesspeople. A GCCP strategy is defined as one that identifies the brand as a symbol of a given global culture, which consumers may purchase to reinforce their membership in that segment. Such messages might suggest that consumers all over the world consume a particular brand, or might imply that the brand serves as a conduit to feeling at one with global culture. Benetton's theme ('The United Colors of Benetton') along with its visual portrayal of multiracial models emphasises the unity of humankind and provides a perfect example of a GCCP strategy. Alden *et al.* (1999) propose that GCCP can be contrasted with two other types of consumer culture positioning. Local consumer culture positioning (LCCP) associates the brand with the local consumer culture. This strategy resonates with some consumer segments because they more readily identify with local lifestyles, values, attitudes and behaviours. For example, Chevrolet has used the slogan 'Baseball, apple pie and Chevrolet' in selling its vehicles to Americans. Foreign consumer culture positioning (FCCP) associates the brand with a specific foreign culture. This strategy is effective because some countries have particularly positive associations with specific product categories. For example, Barilla, Italy's largest pasta manufacturer, took advantage of this association in promoting its products in more than 25 countries with the slogan 'When you think of Italy, think of pasta. When you think of pasta, think of Barilla.' Acknowledging that we are in the relatively early stages of global consumer culture diffusion, Alden *et al.* (1999) proposed that LCCP is currently still used more frequently than FCCP or GCCP, and, indeed, their findings have strongly supported this hypothesis.

This investigation seeks to combine an exploration of the values portrayed in current advertising versus the values portrayed in the past, with

one that examines the values portrayed in the advertising in one country/culture versus those portrayed in another. The investigation compares and contrasts the usage of local cultural values in the advertising of two economically interconnected, yet culturally very different countries, over a period of nearly 30 years. Japan and the United States are both industrialised countries that enjoy substantial economic interaction. In 2006, over US\$207 billion in trade took place between Japan and the US (US – Japan Business Council 2007). Combined, the two countries have a considerable impact on the world economy, accounting for nearly 20% of world exports (World Trade Organization 2007). However, Japan and the US are also countries with distinctly different cultures (Hall & Hall 1987; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1998). Due to their economic prominence and their cultural differences, Japan and the US offer an interesting comparison of cultural values reflected in their commercial communications. Research has documented that the Japanese have traditionally valued indirect and intuitive communications, whereas Americans tended to value direct, exact and unambiguous communications (Lazer *et al.* 1985). These local values have been reflected in the advertisements of their respective cultures. Japanese advertising has traditionally been very soft sell in nature compared to American advertising, which has tended to take a hard-sell approach. An investigation by Mueller (1987), based on advertisements drawn from magazines published in 1978, confirmed that Japanese advertising was indeed far less direct than American-style advertising, and that Japanese ads instead conveyed mood and atmosphere through a beautiful scene, or the development of an emotional story or verse. In short, human sentiments were emphasised over clear-cut product-related appeals. In contrast, US advertising tended to emphasise a sales orientation, and stressed brand names and product recommendations. Implicit and even explicit mention was often made of competitors' products, and product advantage typically depended on performance. Nearly three decades have passed since the messages employed in Mueller's study were crafted. The intervening years have witnessed a dramatic increase in globalisation. Given all that has occurred during this period of time, one might ask whether Japanese advertising today remains traditionally Japanese and whether US advertising also continues to reflect local values. Or has increased globalisation led to a shift in advertising content? To answer these questions, this study both replicates, and improves upon, Mueller's

(1987) content analysis exploring the cultural values reflected in Japanese and American advertising appeals.

## **Comparing Japanese and American culture and communication patterns**

Understanding cultural differences is critical to international business success. Hofstede's (1980) model of national culture has been widely used to identify such differences (Sondergaard 1994). Hofstede initially identified four dimensions of culture that differentiated individuals from different nations in terms of their predominant values: *Individualism*, society's preference for group or individual orientation; *Power Distance*, societal desire for hierarchy or egalitarianism; *Masculinity vs Femininity*, a sex-role dimension; and *Uncertainty Avoidance*, a culture's tolerance of uncertainty. Later research added a fifth dimension, *Long-term Orientation*, the extent to which a society exhibits a pragmatic future-orientated perspective, rather than a conventional historic or short-term point of view. Hofstede's work revealed that the Japanese tend to be collectivistic rather than individualistic, masculine, above average in power distance, and exhibit strong uncertainty avoidance and a long-term orientation. In contrast, Americans are more likely to rank high on both individualism and masculinity, but are below average on power distance, relatively weak in uncertainty avoidance, and tend to exhibit a short-term orientation.

The concept of high and low context also provides an understanding of different cultural orientations, and explains how communication is conveyed and perceived. Hall and Hall (1987) note that low-context cultures place high value on words, and communicators are encouraged to be direct, exact and unambiguous. What is important is what is said, not how it is said, or the environment in which it is said. In contrast, high-context cultures consider verbal communications only as part of the overall message, and communicators rely much more heavily on contextual cues. Messages in high-context cultures tend to be a good deal more implicit and ambiguous, with communicators relying much more on non-verbal behaviour, the physical setting, social circumstances and the nature of interpersonal relationships. These different communication patterns are said to be reflected in the appeals employed within the advertising created in a given market. According to Martenson (1989), one can rank cultures

from high context to low context, starting with the Japanese, the Chinese, the Arab, the Greek, the English, the French, the North American, and ending with the German culture, the most low-context orientated.

de Mooij (1998) summarises additional differences between the cultural systems of Japan and the United States as follows.

- Japanese culture emphasises dependence, whereas American culture emphasises independence.
- In Japan, status is important to show power and success, whereas equal opportunity is emphasised in the US.
- Japanese culture emphasises harmony with nature rather than conquest over nature, whereas humankind's ability to conquer nature is valued in the US.
- In Japan, 'new' is accepted as a collective necessity, but basically the Japanese do not like change. In contrast, American culture is obsessed with change and all that is 'new' and 'better'.
- In Japan, private opinions are generally not expressed, whereas American culture emphasises the expression of private opinions.

The preceding discussion reveals that Japan and the United States each have their own distinct value systems and communication patterns. These different value systems and communication patterns are reflected through the advertising appeals that tend to dominate in each market.

A number of investigations have examined the association between cultural values and advertising in Eastern and Western cultures. China has been the focus of a good number of these investigations (Cheng 1994; Cheng & Schweitzer 1996; Lin 2001; Zhang & Shavitt 2003; Zhang & Harwood 2004). Both Taiwanese (Wang *et al.* 1997; Leach & Liu 1998; Chang 2006; Hsu & Hsu 2007) and Korean (Miracle *et al.* 1992; Cho *et al.* 1999; Bang *et al.* 2005) advertising content has also been analysed. However, comparisons between Japanese and US advertising have been somewhat more limited. In an early investigation, Mueller (1987) outlined a set of values, norms and national characteristics representative of Japanese culture, ranging from the traditional to those more influenced by the West. The prevalent Japanese values, norms and characteristics were operationalised to form both traditionally Japanese appeals (*group/consensus appeal, soft-sell appeal, veneration of elderly, status appeals, oneness with nature appeal*)

and traditionally Western appeals (*individual/independence appeal, hard-sell appeal, youth and modernity appeal, product-merit appeal, and manipulation of nature*). Content analysis was employed to determine the existence or absence of these local appeals in Japanese and American magazine advertisements. Magazine types from each country were matched by format, audience demographics and circulation. *Shukan Asahi* and *Newsweek* were selected as representative news magazines in each country. *Katei Gaho* and *Good Housekeeping* were selected as representative women's magazines in each market. The ads were coded for dominant appeal type.

Surprisingly, the data revealed that Japanese ads made less use of group/consensus appeals than did US ads. Also unexpectedly, Japanese ads were found to make greater use of the typically Western individual/independence appeal than US ads. As expected, Japanese advertising did make significantly greater use of soft-sell appeals than did American commercial messages, and hard-sell themes were a rarity in Japanese ads. More than one in ten of the Japanese ads surveyed stressed tradition or respect for the older generation, but this approach was seldom employed in US ads. The use of youth or modernity appeals showed little difference between the two markets. However, almost twice as many Japanese ads as American ads employed some form of status appeal. The use of product-merit appeals was significantly lower in Japan than in the US. Clearly, product-merit appeals are a mainstay of American advertising. Finally, no major differences were found in the use of oneness with nature appeals, and manipulation of nature appeals was almost non-existent in both markets. The investigation revealed numerous differences between Japanese and American advertising, some rather subtle and others quite blatant. Mueller's (1987) categorisation of advertising appeals reflecting cultural values has been used extensively in cross-cultural advertising research (Alden *et al.* 1999; Cho *et al.* 1999; Katharina 2001; Singh & Schoenbachler 2001; Chan & Cheng 2002; Okazaki & Alonso 2003; Zhang & Shavitt 2003; Zhang & Harwood 2004; Moon & Chan 2005).

Several additional investigations have contributed to the body of literature comparing Japanese and American advertising. Ramaprasad and Hasegawa (1992) compared the advertising styles employed in the television commercials appearing in the two countries. The authors examined the commercials for informational approaches (those presenting factual information) and transformational approaches (those that endow the use



of the brand with an emotional experience). No difference was found in the use of informational vs transformational approaches in the advertising of the two countries. US ads, however, were more likely to employ comparative appeals and hyperbole, while Japanese advertising tended to emphasise mood and nature. Lin (1993) examined the differing levels of informativeness in Japanese and US television ads. Results suggest that Japanese ads are less informative than their US counterparts, reflecting the high-context Japanese culture, in which communication is directed at achieving consensus and harmony in interpersonal relationships. The soft-sell approach dominated in Japanese commercials, and music was employed to set the mood. In contrast, US ads offered more facts and attributes to showcase product superiority.

## **Research questions**

The primary focus of this investigation is on exploring whether local cultural values reflected in the advertising appeals employed in commercial messages are stable over time, or have changed in response to the multitude of factors related to increasing globalisation. Given the magnitude of the possible variables – economic, political and social – that may have caused a shift in either Japanese or American culture over the past three decades, it is impossible to develop hypotheses regarding the increase or decrease in the usage of local advertising appeals employed in the commercial messages in the two countries under investigation. Therefore, we decided to explore whether differences continue to exist in the content of current Japanese and American advertising, by raising three research questions. The first two are as follows.

**RQ1:** To what extent do Japanese print ads today reflect traditionally Japanese appeals (group/consensus, soft sell, veneration of elderly, status, and oneness with nature), and how does this compare with the content of US print ads?

**RQ2:** To what extent do Japanese print ads today reflect traditionally Western appeals (individual/independence, hard sell, youth/modernity, product merit, and manipulation of nature), and how does this compare with the content of US print ads?

The final research question explores the relationship between the type of product being promoted and the advertising appeal employed. Differing appeals may be used to varying degrees, depending on the product category being promoted. Some product categories, by definition, may be more culture-bound. For example, while all humans share the basic biological need for food, just how we respond to this biological drive – what we eat, as well as when, how, where and with whom we eat – is often determined by one’s culture, and thus traditionally local appeals may well be more likely to be employed in promoting foods and beverages. In contrast, high-tech products, such as computers and office equipment, which are often coming to the world market for the first time, are not steeped in the cultural heritage of a particular country. Thus, these products may be less likely to be promoted with product merit or modernity appeals, regardless of the country in which the commercial messages appear. This suggests that like product categories should be compared when examining the cultural content of advertising messages. Thus:

**RQ3:** What differences exist in the use of advertising appeals for a variety of product categories in the US and Japan?

## **Methodology**

To determine the extent to which traditionally Eastern vs traditionally Western values exist in Japanese and American ads today, and to what degree their usage may have changed in the intervening decades, reflecting cultural change, Mueller’s (1987) investigation was both replicated and improved upon. Mueller’s original investigation was based on advertisements appearing during 1978.

For purposes of comparability, the same women’s and general interest/news periodicals employed in the original study were used in the current investigation. For this investigation, all 2005 issues of *Shukan Asahi*, *Katei Gaho*, *Newsweek* and *Good Housekeeping* were collected. The goal was to collect a minimum of 200 advertisements per publication, and an equal number of ads per issue. It should be noted that some publications are weekly while others are monthly, which necessitated the collection of differing numbers of ads from individual issues of the magazines. Coders selected every third ad from each publication until they reached five ads

per issue for *Shukan Asahi*, 18 ads per issue for *Katei Gaho*, five ads per issue for *Newsweek*, and 18 ads per issue for *Good Housekeeping*. For the US sample, 441 ads were collected (224 from *Newsweek* and 217 from *Good Housekeeping*). For the Japanese sample, 404 ads were collected (202 from *Shukan Asahi* and 202 from *Katei Gaho*). The use of these magazines is necessary to enable comparisons with Mueller's initial investigation, but an attempt was made to improve on the original methodology by providing a more representative sample of magazine formats. For the current investigation, two additional formats were included: business magazines and sports publications. As with the women's and general-interest magazines, these publications were also matched in terms of format, audience demographics and circulation. Here again, the goal was to collect a minimum of 200 ads per publication. Coders selected every third ad from the publications until they reached five ads per issue for *Fortune*, five ads per issue for *Sports Illustrated*, five ads per issue for *Nikkei Business* (business publication), and five ads per issue for *Number* (sports magazine). For the US sample, 240 ads were collected from *Fortune* and 218 ads from *Sports Illustrated*. For the Japanese sample, 240 ads were drawn from *Nikkei Business* (business publication) and 209 ads from *Number* (sports magazine). Overall, the sample consisted of 899 US ads and 853 Japanese ads, a significantly larger sample size than that employed in the 1987 study (232 US ads and 146 Japanese ads). Table 1 shows the sample distribution by magazine type. This table reveals that the sample size by magazine type was relatively equal between the two countries (and that the chi-square value was non-significant).

The unit of analysis remains full-page, full-colour advertisements. Mueller (1987) posited that differing appeals would be used to varying degrees, depending on the type of product being promoted. In the current

**Table 1: Sample distribution by magazine type**

Country	News magazine		Women's magazine		Business magazine		Sports magazine		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
US	224	24.9	217	24.1	240	26.7	218	24.2	899	100.0
Japan	202	23.7	202	23.7	240	28.1	209	24.5	853	100.0
Total	426	24.3	419	23.9	480	27.4	427	24.4	1752	100.0

Note:  $\chi^2 = 0.66$  ( $p = 0.88$ )

study, comparable numbers of ads for durable products, non-durable products, and services were selected from the magazines in each country, in order to negate the claim that different appeals are more effective for certain types of products than others, and therefore more commonly employed. A durable product was defined as a product that does not quickly wear out or that, more specifically, yields utility over time (such as an automobile or a household appliance). A non-durable product was defined as the opposite of a durable good: goods that are used up after being used once or several times. They generally have a lifespan of less than three years (for example, foods and cosmetics). Services are a non-material equivalent of a good. Service provision has been defined as an economic activity that does not result in ownership, and this is what differentiates it from physical goods (examples include insurance and health care). Durable, non-durable and service ads were further categorised into one of 11 product categories: automotive, beauty/personal care, food/drink, medications, services, household appliances, clothing, computers/office equipment, entertainment/travel, corporate and miscellaneous. With the exception of the addition of a computers/office equipment classification, these categories were based on those employed in Lin's (2001) and Katz and Lee's (1992) investigations. This variety of product categories should accurately reflect the appeal types that dominate in each culture. See Table 2 for sample distribution by product category.

**Table 2: Sample distribution by product category**

Product categories	US (n = 897)		Japan (n = 853)		Total (n = 1750)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Auto	120	13.3	111	13.0	231	13.2
Beauty/personal care	56	6.2	34	4.0	90	5.1
Food/drink	79	8.8	87	10.2	166	9.5
Medicine	62	6.9	29	3.4	91	5.2
Service	145	16.1	147	17.2	292	16.7
Household appliances/furnishing/electronics	94	10.5	43	5.0	137	7.8
Clothing	54	6.0	136	15.9	190	10.9
Computer/office equipment	36	4.0	24	2.8	60	3.4
Entertainment	35	3.9	64	7.5	99	5.7
Corporate ads	114	12.7	84	9.8	198	11.3
Miscellaneous	102	11.6	94	11.0	196	11.2
Total	899	100.0	853	100.0	1752	100.0

Advertising appeals are defined as the motive towards which an ad is directed: the ad is designed to stir a person towards a goal that the advertiser has set (Lane *et al.* 2005). Mueller's (1987) operational definitions of advertising appeals were adapted for this study. The core definitions of the ten appeal categories remained the same, but a sentence or two was added to each definition to ensure clarity. The additional copy included read as follows: *Group/consensus* (authority figures may be emphasised; standing out from the crowd or asserting oneself beyond the will of the group is played down; mere portrayal of a group is not sufficient, nor are verbal references to 'we' or 'us'); *Soft sell* (verbal and visual metaphors not directly related to the product are employed; product-focused messages are not considered soft sell); *Veneration of elderly* (mere depiction of elderly models is not sufficient); *Oneness with nature* (back-to-nature and conservation themes, and the ecological benefits of the product/service are stressed; mere depiction of nature is not sufficient); *Individual/independence* (mere portrayal of an individual model is not sufficient, nor are verbal references to 'you' or 'yours'); *Hard sell* (mere mention of product benefits is not sufficient); *Youth/modernity* (stress on contemporariness (replacement of older technologies); deification of the younger generation is emphasised and youthful benefits of the product – such as rejuvenation – are stressed; mere depiction of youthful models is not sufficient); and *Manipulation of nature* (humankind's superiority over nature is reflected, and there is an emphasis on technological advances that overcome nature). The definitions of the *Product merit* and *Status* appeals remained unchanged (see Table 3 for complete definitions). The instrument was translated from the source language (English) by a bilingual translator, a native speaker of the target language (Japanese). When this version had been translated back into the source language, the two versions were compared in the source language, to check for discrepancies.

Appeals are typically carried in the illustration and the headline. Copy tends to reinforce these two elements. Both visual information (pictures, photographs and illustrations) and verbal information (headlines, sub-headlines and body copy) were examined for appeal type. Ads were coded in the language of the publication. Two coders who were native speakers, and had been raised in the culture of the country, were hired to analyse the US ads, and two others for the Japanese ads. All four coders received extensive training. Coders were provided with the operational definitions

**Table 3: Revised advertising appeals**

Types	Categories	Definitions
Traditional appeals:	Group/ consensus appeal	Emphasis here is on the individual in relationship with others – typically his or her reference group. The individual is depicted as an integral part of a whole. References may be made to significant others, such as the 'senpai/kohai' or superior/inferior relationship. Authority figures may be emphasised. Standing out from the crowd or asserting oneself beyond the will of the group is played down. Pressure is on consensus and conformity to the will of the group. Mere portrayal of a group is not sufficient, nor are verbal references to 'we' or 'us'.
	Soft-sell appeal	Mood and atmosphere are conveyed through a beautiful scene, or the development of an emotional story or verse. Verbal and visual metaphors not directly related to the product are employed. Human emotional sentiments are emphasised over clear-cut, product-related selling recommendations. Product-focused messages are not considered soft sell.
	Veneration of elderly appeal	Wisdom of the elderly, as well as the traditional, is stressed. Depiction of older group members being asked for advice, opinions and recommendations. Mere depiction of elderly models is not sufficient.
	Status appeal	Advertisements suggest that the use of a particular product will enhance or improve some inherent quality of the user in the eyes of others. Position and rank within the context of the group are stressed. Also includes foreign status appeals, employing words or phrases in foreign languages, or foreign models portrayed using or wearing the product. Celebrity endorsements are common.
	Oneness with nature appeal	Interaction and affinity of humankind and nature is stressed. Back-to-nature and conservation themes, and as well as ecological benefits of the product/service are stressed. Mere depiction of nature is not sufficient.
Modern appeals:	Individual/independence appeal	Emphasis on the individual as being distinct, and unlike others. Individuals depicted as standing out in a crowd or having the ability to be self-sufficient. Nonconformity, originality and uniqueness are key terms. Dependency is downplayed. Mere portrayal of an individual model is not sufficient, nor are verbal references to 'you' or 'yours'.
	Hard-sell appeal	Sales-orientated advertising messages making explicit or implicit mention of competitive products. Product advantage depends on performance that is superior on some particular criterion. The category also includes such statements as 'number one' and 'leader'. Mere mention of product benefits is not sufficient.
	Youth and modernity appeal	Emphasis is on modernity. Stress is on contemporariness (replacement of older technologies). Deification of the younger generation is emphasised and youthful benefits of the product (rejuvenation) are stressed. Mere depiction of youthful models is not sufficient.
	Product-merit appeal	Focus in on the product. An objective presentation of the product's characteristics, features and/or benefits to the consumer is stressed.
	Manipulation of nature appeal	Theme of humankind triumphing over the elements of nature. Humankind's superiority over nature is reflected, as well as an emphasis on technological advances to overcome nature.

of the ten appeal categories, and were then asked to find examples of each appeal category in magazines not utilised as part of the investigation. Their selections were discussed with the two primary investigators. Next, coders were provided with older issues of the magazines utilised in this investigation. Each coder was asked to independently code the first ten ads in each issue. Coders then exchanged publications and again coded the first ten ads in each issue. In total, each coder analysed 80 ads. Coders were encouraged to list questions and identify problematic advertisements. The coder teams, along with the investigators, compared their coding efforts. Conflicting evaluations were discussed in depth.

In Mueller's (1987) investigation, a single dominant appeal was selected for each advertisement. However, in the current investigation, even after extensive training, coders claimed that it was extremely difficult to select just one appeal, given the nature of many of the advertising messages. Given that Mueller's original sample was drawn from 1978 publications, and that nearly three decades have since passed, it seemed reasonable to assume that advertising content has perhaps become more complex over this period. Therefore, it was decided to allow coders to identify more than one appeal per ad whenever necessary. To improve further on Mueller's original methodology, all appeals in the sample were coded on a four-point scale, ranging from 'non-existent' (coded as 0), to 'weak' (coded as 1), to 'medium' (coded as 2), to 'strong' (coded as 3).

Adopting Lin's (2001) approach, the appeals in ads were evaluated as follows: for example, an ad 'featuring an automobile that uses a soft-sell appeal would be coded as strong if only soft imagery is shown and no promotional language is used. The same ad would be coded as moderate if the soft imagery is accompanied by a small amount of promotional language, such as a brief mention of the key selling point or a tagline. When the same ad is coded as weak in soft-sell appeal, the main soft imagery is bundled up with a secondary straightforward pitch that is more elaborate than brief. If the appeal category was not present in an advertisement, then 0 was coded for the ad. Use of a four-point ordinal scale captured more precisely the strength of appeals, and provided for improved statistical analysis.

Only after the coders had demonstrated a high level of inter-coder agreement were they provided with the actual issues of the magazines used in the current investigation. Coders first independently completed

a coding sheet for each ad, and noted whether the item was a durable product, a non-durable product, or a service, the specific product category, and whether or not each of the ten appeals was reflected in the ad. Next, coders compared their results. Conflicts were resolved through discussion between each pair of coders.

## Results

Results for the three research questions are presented in Tables 4–6. Table 4 presents the advertising appeals in the US and Japanese sample at the aggregate level. Table 4 presents both frequency counts and average strength (i.e. means) of the appeals. Regarding the latter, statistical differences between Japanese and American advertisements were analysed by *t*-tests. As Table 4 shows, the significance (alpha) level for these *t*-tests is set at 0.01. However, because multiple comparisons between the two groups were performed, Type 1 errors – often associated with conducting large numbers of related *t*-tests – may have been inflated. Thus, the Bonferroni corrections were applied to the tests, whereby the alpha level was adjusted by dividing the original alpha level by the number of comparisons (10). Hence, *p*-values were required to achieve the adjusted alpha level of 0.001.

### RQ1

Regarding the use of traditional appeals, in contrast to previous investigations, differences in the use of the group/consensus appeal and status appeal in two countries were not statistically significant. Interestingly, soft-sell appeals were commonly employed in the advertisements of both countries, but were employed to an even greater extent in US ads (mean of 1.57) than in Japanese ads (mean of 0.90). The difference was statistically significant (adjusted  $p < 0.001$ ), but not in the direction suggested by previous investigations. With regard to the ‘veneration of the elderly’ appeal, the findings are in line with previous investigations, and the differences between the US and Japanese samples are statistically significant. This appeal was used significantly more frequently in Japanese ads (mean of 0.17) than in US ads (mean of 0.01). Finally, the ‘oneness with nature appeal’ was employed to a greater extent in the Japanese sample (mean of



**Table 4: Advertising appeals in the US and Japanese samples at an aggregate level**

Advertising appeals	Country	N	Frequency counts (%)	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p
Group/consensus appeal	US	899	2.0	0.06	0.39	-2.52	1678.2	N.S.
	Japan	853	3.1	0.12	0.46			
Individual/independence appeal	US	899	1.3	0.05	0.38	-1.68	1681.7	N.S.
	Japan	853	3.2	0.08	0.29			
Soft-sell appeal	US	899	40.8	1.57	1.43	11.02	1670.1	***
	Japan	853	21.8	0.90	1.09			
Hard-sell appeal	US	899	3.4	0.10	0.50	-1.22	1702.3	N.S.
	Japan	853	5.0	0.13	0.40			
Veneration of elderly appeal	US	899	0.2	0.01	0.12	-10.75	975.2	***
	Japan	853	6.7	0.17	0.44			
Youth/modernity appeal	US	899	1.1	0.04	0.31	-11.53	1385.5	***
	Japan	853	10.8	0.27	0.51			
Status appeal	US	899	4.3	0.16	0.66	-2.56	1748.3	N.S.
	Japan	853	6.8	0.25	0.65			
Product-merit appeal	US	899	45.2	1.54	1.33	4.56	1647.9	***
	Japan	853	34.8	1.28	0.98			
Oneness with nature appeal	US	899	1.6	0.05	0.35	-4.99	1582.4	***
	Japan	853	5.2	0.15	0.47			
Manipulation of nature appeal	US	899	0.2	0.00	0.08	-6.10	1004.9	***
	Japan	853	2.6	0.06	0.27			

Note: \*\*\* indicates that p-value achieved the Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of 0.001 (two-tailed test). Equal variances are not assumed; N.S.= statistically insignificant mean comparison pair.

0.15) than in the US sample (mean of 0.05), which is consistent with prior research.

## *RQ2*

With regard to the use of Westernised appeals, some interesting differences were also found. Quite surprisingly, neither individual/independence appeals nor hard-sell appeals produced statistically significant differences between the Japanese and US ads. Next, youth/modernity appeals were found to be more common in Japanese advertising (mean of 0.27) than in US advertisements (mean of 0.4). Results for product-merit appeals reveal that, although this appeal appeared more frequently in US ads (mean of 1.53), it was reflected in a surprisingly large number of Japanese ads (mean of 1.28). Contrary to previous findings, ‘manipulation of nature’ appeals were used significantly more often in the Japanese sample (mean of 0.06) than in the US sample (mean of 0.00). However, because of its rare appearance in the latter, this difference does not appear meaningful, even if statistically significant.

From the above data, it appears that product merit and soft sell are the most popular appeal types in both countries, though both appeals were reflected to an even greater degree in the US sample than in the Japanese sample. It is interesting to note that all other appeal types show the opposite trend: they are reflected to a greater degree in the Japanese sample than in the US sample.

Table 5 presents the strength (‘weak’, ‘moderate’ or ‘strong’) of six of the advertising appeals employed in the US and Japanese samples. The remaining four appeal categories – group/consensus appeal, individual/independence appeal, hard-sell appeals, and status appeals – were excluded from this analysis due to the lack of significant differences in their usage between the American and Japanese samples at the aggregate level.

The data suggest that the differences in the reflection of appeals at the aggregate levels stem from differences in the use of ‘strong’ appeals. That is, striking differences are observed in the use of soft-sell and product-merit appeals at the ‘strong’ level: both appeals are employed to a greater extent in the US sample than in the Japanese sample. The traditional soft-sell appeal is strongly reflected in an amazing 48.2% of US ads, but in a mere

**Table 5: Advertising appeals in the US and Japanese samples at a separate level**

Advertising appeals	Country	N	Weak		Moderate		Strong	
			%	$\chi^2$	%	$\chi^2$	%	$\chi^2$
Soft sell	US	899	6.2	50.86***	3.3	104.24***	48.2	268.48***
	Japan	853	17.1		18.4		12.1	
Veneration of elderly	US	899	0.0	123.70***	0.1	9.98**	0.1	0.31 <sup>a</sup>
	Japan	853	12.9		1.4		0.4	
Youth/modernity	US	899	0.3	196.62***	0.3	18.77***	0.9	3.71 <sup>a</sup>
	Japan	853	20.6		2.9		0.1	
Product merit	US	899	14.5	125.08***	9.1	72.90***	40.3	153.75***
	Japan	853	37.9		24.3		13.8	
Oneness with nature	US	899	0.6	67.01***	0.6	4.03*	1.1	0.01
	Japan	853	8.7		1.5		1.1	
Manipulation of nature	US	899	0.2	43.91***	0.1	0.002 <sup>a</sup>	0.0	0.00 <sup>a</sup>
	Japan	853	5.4		0.2		0.1	

<sup>a</sup> Continuity correction because 2 cells have expected count less than 5; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed test).

12.1% of Japanese ads. Similarly, the Westernised product-merit appeal is strongly reflected in 40.3% of US ads, but in only 13.8% of Japanese ads. The Japanese sample is more likely to include all other appeal categories at a ‘weak’ or ‘moderate’ level. For example, chi-square tests indicate that all appeals are used significantly more often at the ‘weak’ level in the Japanese sample than in the US sample.

### RQ3

To explore whether differences exist in the use of ad appeals for different product categories, products were classified into one of 11 product categories. Table 6 summarises appeal types by product category. Consistent with Table 5, only the six appeal categories demonstrating significance are presented. Advertising appeals employed in the two countries clearly varied with the product category being promoted. In particular, significant variation was found for automobiles, food/drink, services, clothing, and corporate campaigns.

With regard to autos, US ads were more likely than their Japanese counterparts to employ the Western appeals of product merit ( $t = -8.29***$ )

**Table 6: Appeal types by product category**

Product categories	t-values					
	Soft sell	Veneration of elderly	Youth/modernity	Product merit	Oneness with nature	Manipulation of nature
Auto	-2.99**	-1.48	12.29***	-8.29***	-3.69***	-7.24***
Beauty/personal care	1.09	4.88***	-2.07*	1.00	-1.44	1.00
Food/drink	-3.40**	1.04	3.41**	-2.52*	-5.29***	1.00
Medicine	0.34	0.80	2.42*	-1.80	-1.44	na
Service	-1.22	9.93***	-5.73***	-2.92**	-5.17***	-1.00
Household appliances etc.	0.22	2.68**	0.48	-1.09	-0.26	-0.06
Clothing	1.77	0.29	8.38***	na	-4.63***	-1.00
Computer/office equipment	-1.00	2.14*	-3.02**	-1.42	na	-1.00
Entertainment	0.80	3.58**	0.21	1.00	-2.78**	na
Corporate ads	-2.04*	1.39	-1.55***	0.33	-3.48**	na
Miscellaneous	-2.81**	7.64***	-2.74**	0.94	-3.95**	na

Note: Equal variance was not assumed. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , na = not applicable.

and manipulation of nature ( $t = -7.24^{***}$ ). At the same time, however, the American ads were more likely to employ the traditional Japanese appeals of soft sell ( $t = -2.99^{**}$ ) and oneness with nature ( $t = -3.69^{***}$ ). In contrast, Japanese ads were significantly more likely to employ the Western appeal of youth/modernity ( $t = 12.29^{***}$ ) to sell autos.

Similar patterns can be observed in the promotion of food and drink. US ads were somewhat more likely than Japanese ads to employ the Western appeal of product merit ( $t = -2.52^*$ ), but also the traditional appeals of soft sell ( $t = -3.40^{**}$ ) and oneness with nature ( $t = -5.29^{***}$ ). Japanese ads were more likely than their US counterparts to employ the Western appeal of youth/modernity ( $t = 3.41^{**}$ ) to market food and drink to Japanese consumers.

In promoting services, US ads were more likely than Japanese ads to reflect the Western appeals of modernity/youth ( $t = -5.73^{***}$ ) and product merit ( $t = -2.92^{**}$ ). However, they were also more likely than the Japanese ads to reflect the traditionally Japanese appeal of oneness with nature ( $t = -5.17^{***}$ ). In contrast, the Japanese sample was significantly more likely to make use of the traditional appeal of veneration of the elderly ( $t = 9.93^{***}$ ) to sell services. Similarly, regarding clothing, US ads were more

apt to employ oneness with nature ( $t = -4.63^{***}$ ), while Japanese ads tended to use youth/modernity ( $t = 8.38^{***}$ ).

For corporate campaigns, US ads were more likely to employ the Western appeal of youth/modernity ( $t = -1.55^{***}$ ) than the Japanese sample, but they were also more likely to make use of two traditional appeals: oneness with nature ( $t = -3.48^{**}$ ) and soft sell ( $t = -2.04^*$ ).

Much less variation was found in the promotion of the remaining product categories. In selling medications, a Western appeal (youth/modernity) was also employed more often in the Japanese sample ( $t = 2.42^*$ ). For entertainment, US ads were more likely to reflect the traditional appeal of oneness with nature ( $t = -2.78^{**}$ ). In contrast, entertainment was more likely to be promoted in Japan with the traditional appeal of veneration of the elderly ( $t = 3.58^{**}$ ). For beauty/personal care products, US ads were significantly more likely than Japanese ads to reflect youth/modernity appeals ( $t = -2.07^*$ ), while the Japanese sample was significantly more likely to reflect the veneration of elderly appeal in marketing products such as make-up and shampoo ( $t = 4.88^{***}$ ). For household appliances, such as vacuum cleaners and microwave ovens, Japanese ads were more likely to employ the veneration of elderly appeal ( $t = 2.68^{**}$ ). Finally, for computers/office equipment, US ads were more likely than Japanese ads to reflect youth/modernity ( $t = -3.02^{**}$ ), while Japanese ads were more likely to reflect the veneration of the elderly in selling products such as copiers and fax machines ( $t = 2.14^*$ ).

## Discussion

In comparing Mueller's original investigation (based on ads in 1978 publications) with the current sample (based on ads in 2005 publications), the findings suggest that the appeals employed in Japanese advertising have shifted significantly during this period.

Japanese advertising's use of soft-sell appeals remained amazingly constant between the two time periods: 21.2% in the original sample vs 21.8% in the current study. In contrast, the use of this appeal increased dramatically in the US sample (from 5.2% to 40.8%). Indeed, this traditionally Eastern appeal was employed in nearly twice as many US advertisements as Japanese advertisements. It is of interest to note that Alden *et al.* (1999) hypothesised that advertisements employing global consumer culture

**Table 7: Comparison between the results of the present study and Mueller's (1987) study**

	Mueller (1987) 1978 sample		Present study 2005 sample	
	US N = 232	Japan N = 146	US N = 899	Japan N = 853
<b>Advertising appeals</b>				
Group/consensus appeal	9.0	6.8	2.0	3.1
Individual/independence appeal	4.7	6.2	1.3	3.2
Soft-sell appeal	5.2	21.2	40.8	21.8
Hard-sell appeal	5.6	1.4	3.4	5.0
Veneration of elderly appeal	1.3	11.0	0.2	6.7
Youth/modernity appeal	3.9	2.1	1.1	10.8
Status appeal	9.9	17.1	4.3	6.8
Product-merit appeal	56.3	28.1	45.2	34.8
Oneness with nature appeal	3.9	5.5	1.6	5.2
Manipulation of nature appeal	0.4	0.7	0.2	2.6

positioning (GCCP) would rely more heavily on a soft-sell approach rather than a hard-sell approach. The authors noted that the features of soft-sell advertisements (subtlety, implicitness and abstractness) would seem to make them more suitable for advertisements using GCCP:

Because global consumer culture is an emerging and rapidly changing phenomenon, with differing sets of signs in differing global segments, advertising using this positioning should be more effective if it communicates in a subtle, indirect, and abstract fashion. (Alden *et al.* 1999, p. 79).

Indeed, their research revealed that well over half the GCCP ads surveyed employed such a soft-sell approach.

While the use of soft-sell appeals in Japanese advertising appears to have remained fairly constant, the use of hard-sell appeals increased from 1.4% to 5% in the intervening years. In comparison, the use of hard-sell appeals in American advertising dropped (from 5.6% to 3.4%). Product merit, an advertising appeal that has been widely recognised as 'American', increased in Japanese advertising between 1978 and 2005 (from 28.1% to 34.8%). Product merit appeals were employed in 45.2% of the current US advertisements. Taken together, the changes observed in the use of soft-sell, hard-sell and product-merit appeals may be indicative of a subtle transition in Japanese advertising, yet a dramatic shift in US advertising.

It appears that Japanese firms have turned to a somewhat more direct and persuasive selling approach, while maintaining a tradition of Japanese subtlety. While the use of soft-sell appeals remained relatively stable over the intervening years in Japanese commercial communications, the use of this appeal category jumped nearly eightfold in American advertising. Given the modest usage of hard-sell appeals and the dramatic increase in the use of soft-sell appeals, American ads appear to have moved away from a hard-hitting and aggressive strategy to a more benefit-orientated strategy with a distinctly softer touch.

Little difference was found in the use of group/consensus appeals between the current Japanese and US samples (3.1% vs 2.0%) and it appears that, overall, the usage of this appeal in both countries has dropped since the original investigation. While the use of individual/independence appeals dropped in Japanese advertising between 1978 and 2005, from 6.2% to 3.2%, curiously, current Japanese advertising reflects a greater use of this very Western appeal than do US messages (1.3%). Youth/modernity appeals increased fivefold in Japanese advertising, from 2.1% in 1978 to 10.8% in the current sample. Indeed, the frequency of use of this appeal was significantly greater in the Japanese sample than in the US sample (where only 1.1% of ads in 2005 reflected this appeal). Yet, use of the veneration of the elderly/traditional appeal in the Japanese sample dropped, from 11% to 6.7%. This appeal category is almost non-existent in current American advertising, where it appears in just 0.2% of ads. Japanese advertising today appears to be blending the new with the old, and the Western with the traditional.

Two advertising appeal categories characteristic of Eastern culture were indeed employed more frequently in the Japanese sample: status appeals and oneness with nature appeals. Status appeals appeared in 6.8% of current Japanese advertisements, compared to 4.3% of current US advertisements. It should be noted, however, that this represents a significant drop compared with the usage of status appeals in Japanese advertisements in 1978 (17.1%). The use of oneness with nature appeals has remained relatively constant in Japanese advertising (5.5% in 1978 vs 5.2% in 2005), but usage of the appeal dropped in the US sample (from 3.9% to 1.6%). It is interesting that the Japanese ads also made greater use of manipulation of nature appeals, which increased from a mere 0.7% to 2.6% during the period under analysis. Such appeals remain a rarity in US advertising.

Traditionally Japanese appeals (specifically, soft sell and oneness with nature) were most likely to dominate in US ads for autos, food/drink, services and corporate campaigns. The Western appeal of youth/modernity was most likely to dominate in Japanese ads for autos, food/drink, medications, and clothing. Interestingly, for beauty/personal care products, household appliances and computers/office equipment, the Western appeal of youth/modernity dominated in US ads, while a traditional appeal (veneration of the elderly) dominated in Japanese advertising.

The results of this content analysis suggest that Japanese advertising today has remained much the same in some respects, but has changed in others. Japanese advertising still appeals to the consumer on an emotional level, and attempts to build atmosphere within the confines of the printed page, but this is increasingly blended with significantly more direct communications that highlight the product's features and attest to its benefits. One might argue that Japanese advertising has become somewhat more 'American'. At the same time, it appears that American advertising may have become significantly more 'Japanese', with the use of soft-sell appeals increasing more than eightfold. Perhaps the future may bring increasing convergence in commercial messages between East and West. Such convergence may well be due to the effects of globalisation on advertising content. Though we may be in the early stages of global consumer culture diffusion, the results of this study suggest that a shift in advertising content is taking place in both Japan and the US, and local consumer culture positioning is no longer necessarily the dominant strategy in either market.

## **Limitations and future research directions**

In interpreting the findings of this investigation, two important limitations should be recognised, to provide a balanced discussion. First, a general problem associated with content analysis restricts the interpretation and discussion of the findings. Content analysis, by definition, is an observational technique, and although it enables the detection of changes in manifest content, it does not allow the researcher to identify the 'true' causes of such change. Second, although this investigation was based on Mueller's (1987) study, several improvements were made to the initial methodology. Two additional magazine formats (business and sports) were added to the



original formats (general interest/news and women's). Rather than requiring coders to select just one dominant appeal, as in the original investigation, and given the complexity of advertising content today, coders were allowed to list more than one appeal per ad, and were further required to categorise the strength of the appeal as weak, moderate or strong. Finally, additional explication of the original operational definitions of the appeal categories was provided to coders. Although these modifications clearly improved upon the methodology employed in the 1987 investigation, they make it impossible to compare directly the findings of the original investigation and the present study.

To further research in this area, and to draw a clearer picture of the cultural values reflected in advertising content, several possible directions can be suggested. Subsequent investigations might explore whether the usage of appeal categories in broadcast media is similar to, or different from, their use in print. An examination of other advertising media might also be fruitful. Second, while this study explored the differing usage of appeal categories for 11 specific product categories, different product classifications might also prove useful, such as the Foote, Cone and Belding Matrix (high involvement/think, high involvement/feel, low involvement/think, low involvement/feel). As Taylor and Stern (1997) noted, content analysis merely reflects what is available, not what consumers would prefer. Thus, it would be most valuable to determine how Japanese and American consumers actually respond to varying appeal types, from the local to the more global. Responses may well vary, depending on the subject's age and sex. Finally, it behoves advertisers to track whether global consumer culture positioning will play an increasingly important role in the advertising of various countries around the world, or whether the importance of local culture will continue to dominate advertising content.

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