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Tangibilizing services through visual tangible cues in corporate Web sites: a six-country cross-cultural analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine cross-cultural differences in the use of visual tangible cues in local corporate Web sites of six nations.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative content analysis was used to obtain a numerically based summary of visual tangible cues utilized in 207 Web sites of global service corporations.

Findings – A clear pattern of differences was observed in the major visual functions (literal vs symbolic), the use of photographs vs illustrations and the utilization of interactive elements between two groups of nations. Eastern visuals tend to rely more on symbolic visuals performing association function, mixed use of photographs and illustrations and customer endorsement, whereas Western visuals are more likely to perform literal functions, use photographs and feature customer–employee interactions.

Practical implications – International services marketers who are planning a global campaign on the Web can benefit by using differentiated visual strategies, which reflect unique cultural characteristics of a target market.

Originality/value – This study adds a new contribution to an international account of Web services advertising in maintaining a comprehensive understanding of contemporary use of visual tangibles cues. It could benefit global services advertisers with both practical and theoretical implications, for no systematic studies have ever touched the visualization strategies on the Web.

Keywords Content analysis, Corporate Web sites, Services advertising, Visual tangible cues

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this issue.

Introduction

Service businesses have undergone dramatic growth over the past 40 years and now account for more than 70 per cent of the world’s total output (World Bank, 2012). Nearly one-third of the world’s top 500 companies are service companies (CNN, 2012). As the growth of service businesses continues to escalate, a body of research has examined numerous service marketing topics. While agreeing that services have distinct characteristics that differentiate from goods (Zeithaml et al., 1985; Stafford, 1996), researchers have recognized the importance of tangible cues in services advertising to overcome the intangibility and abstractness of most services (Zeithaml et al., 1985; Cutler and Javalgi, 1993). The basic advice is to make an intangible service more tangible for improving services advertising strategy (Berry and Clark, 1986; Clow et al., 1998). Although tangibilization strategies may not be equally effective across different types of services (e.g. experience vs credence services and business-to-business (B2B) vs business-to-consumer (B2C) services, Stafford, 1996; Stafford and Day, 1995; Turley and Kelley, 1997), the service literature suggests that visual tangible cues should be advantageous to services advertisers by providing an observable means of tangibilizing an intangible offering (Stafford, 1996).

As an increasing number of service firms have been expanding into international markets, the intangibility factor has been documented for years as an important issue facing international services marketers (Stafford, 1996). The basic recommendation is to use tangibilization strategies differently across cultures (Albers-Miller and Stafford, 1999a; Bang and Moon, 2002; Bang et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2008) because of the cultural influences on customers’ service expectations (Furrer et al., 2000; Reimann et al., 2008). Despite widespread agreement on the effectiveness of differentiated tangibilization strategies across cultures, there has been a lack of research specifically addressing visual tangible cues in the context of international services advertising. This study intends to fill this gap in literature by examining the visual tangible cues utilized in global service corporations’ Web sites targeted toward six national markets.

Six countries, all of which represent the world’s leading advertising markets (Barnard, 2012), are selected as a target market on the basis of the cultural dimensions suggested by...
Hofstede (1980) and Hall (1976). The USA, the UK and Germany are chosen to represent Western cultures, characterized by small power distance, individualism, low uncertainty avoidance and low information context, whereas Japan, China and Korea are representative of Eastern cultures, characterized by large power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and high information context. According to Porter and Samovar’s (1982) scale of social-cultural differences, Western and Eastern cultures exhibit maximum differences. Given that an increasing number of global service marketers have been utilizing the Web as an important tool for communicating with international consumers and the Web assists in alleviating issues associated with intangibility of service offerings, this study intends to examine the front or main pages of the local Web sites targeted toward customers of the six countries, which are well qualified for an ad (An, 2007). Specifically, the local Web sites are compared on the following components of visual tangibilization strategies: functions of visuals, photographs vs illustrations and interactive elements. While the first two categories have been the subjects of previous studies pertaining to the use of visual strategies in advertising (An, 2007; Cutler and Javalgi, 1992; Moriarty, 1987), the category of interactive elements is newly added in this study because services Web sites can benefit from displaying human interactions in tangibilizing services via its visual components. While the use of interactive elements has been examined in the context of corporate Web site strategies (Cho and Cheon, 2005), very few studies examined its applicability in services advertising. This study, therefore, provides the beginning step to examine interactive elements used in services advertising across cultures.

On the practical side, by examining the differences in the major visual tangibilization strategies in services advertising, this empirical research can help service marketers obtain a standard for comparison for an assessment of international advertising practices on the Web. The findings may also provide academic researchers an insight into how cultural dimensions are linked to visual tangibilization strategies for services on the Web.

**Literature review**

**Tangibility in services advertising**

One of the distinctive characteristics of services is intangibility, which refers to the inability to assess the value gained from engaging in an activity using any tangible evidence. It is often used to describe services where there is not a tangible product that the customer can purchase, that can be seen, tasted or touched (Filip, 1988). The intangible nature of services makes it challenging to effectively communicate about them (Zeithaml et al., 1985; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). A constant advice from services scholars has been to use tangibilization strategies in advertising, which is to provide tangible proofs of about the quality of the service offerings (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Mittal, 2002).

A number of content-analytic studies have examined how tangibilization strategies are utilized in advertising and yielded some practical insight into current services advertising strategies. For example, Cutler and Javalgi (1993) analyzed the component structure of visuals in magazine ads for services and goods in four different product categories – consumer services, consumer non-durable products, consumer durable products and others. As consistent with the findings of Zinkhan et al. (1992) study of television commercials, their results showed that services ads more often used an emotional appeal, an emotional appeal process and an emotional headline than did product ads. They also found that quality and convenience appeals were less frequently used in services ads than in product ads and company employees were less frequently portrayed in services ads than in product ads. Considering that rational appeal strategies, such as the use of straightforward facts and figures (Stafford, 1996) and the realistic representations of the service, customer contact people, business facilities and specific information (Berry and Clark 1986), were found in other studies to work better to tangibilize the service and to alleviate the abstractness of service offerings (Stafford and Day, 1995; Tripp, 1997), these findings are somewhat controversial.

Studies on the use of informational and factual cues also yielded inconsistent findings. Grove et al. (1995) found that services ads more often contained informational and factual cues than did product ads, whereas Abernethy and Butler (1992) concluded that services actually use fewer informational cues in their ads. LaBand et al. (1992) attributed the use of informational strategies to the intangibility of services, contending that more factual information can help reduce the level of intangibility. In contrast, Zinkhan et al. (1992) and Cutler and Javalgi (1993) suggest that emotional strategies that create meaningful associations with an intangible service can be effective.

Other researchers have begun to look into the differences between different types of services in the use of tangibilization strategies. For example, Stafford (1996) examined the tangibilization strategies of magazine ads for both experience and credence services and found that while verbal tangible cues influenced attitudes toward ads and the service providers, purchase intention and advertising recall, the findings varied by the type of services. Classifying services into utilitarian and experiential services, Albers-Miller and Stafford (1999a) reported that rational appeals were used more heavily in utilitarian service (i.e. financial services) advertising, while emotional appeals were more dominant in experiential service (i.e. travel services) advertising. Interestingly, Turley and Kelley (1997) examined the difference in the use of advertising appeals between B2B and B2C services advertising. The results of their analysis of 186 magazine ads showed that while there was no significant difference in the use of headline, quality claims, price information and Internet address between B2B and B2C services ads, B2B services ads more often used rational appeals than did B2C ads. Although the content analysis findings are inconsistent, most authors offer the same explanation (i.e. the intangibility of services) for their results. In short, as intangibility is a prevalent theme in services advertising research, much of the earlier work on services emphasized the use of tangible cues in advertising to overcome the intangibility of services (Stafford, 1996).

**Advertising visuals**

In general, visual appeal is a crucial part in communication process to command attention and stimulate curiosity (Hecker and Stewart, 1988; Moriarty, 1997). It is used in advertising in
various forms: the use of imagery, visual associations, drawings and paintings, models, visual memory devices, product and corporate symbols (Hecker and Stewart, 1988). All these are pervasive in services advertising to communicate those intangible benefits that do not reside in or stem from the tangible aspects of a service offering (Hill et al., 2004). Hill et al. (2004) further argue that by transmitting the intangible benefits of a service offering, visuals evoke a clear mental image of the positive outcomes associated with the service offerings, thus making it easier for customers to fully appreciate the benefits. Visuals are also used to establish a personality for a service, associate the service with certain symbols and lifestyles and anchor the brand identity in the minds of the target audience (Moriarty, 1987).

Rossiter and Percy (1983) showed that the elements of visual stimuli in advertising influenced the viewer response: picture size, exposure time and number of exposure. An increase in any of these three variables has been shown to increase recognition, encoding of details and development of denotative images among viewers of ads. Visual stimuli can also have an effect on textual components in ads and, in turn, affect brand awareness or liking (Edell and Staelin, 1983). Edell and Staelin (1983) found that ads were more effective when the picture “agreed” with the textual message. As Hill et al. (2004) recently found that visuals have a positive effect on informativeness of an ad, perceived quality of a service offering and likelihood of service patronage, visual appeal is easily the most important dimension of a services advertising message.

Visual tangible cues in services advertising

Berry and Clark’s (1986) typology is one of the numerous recommendations on the practical use of tangible cues in services advertising, proposing four different strategies that take into account both verbal and visual tangible cues for enhancing tangibility: visualization, association, physical representation and documentation. A visualization strategy is the use of vivid mental picture of a service’s benefits of qualities, which enables customers to experience the service mentally. For example, if an ad shows a cruise line where passengers are enjoying dancing and dining, prospective customers could imagine enjoying themselves on the ship. An association strategy refers to the connection of an extrinsic good, person, event, place or object with the actual service, which helps customers easily comprehend and evaluate the service. This strategy is designed to establish a psychological association between a vaguely perceived service and a more easily perceived tangible object. Prudential’s association with a rock is an example of an association strategy where a rock signifies the solid, unwavering security and peace of mind a customer desires from insurance companies. A physical representation strategy refers to the use of tangible cues (i.e. physical evidence and artifacts of the service) that are directly or peripherally part of a service. An example would be a bank credit card in gold or platinum symbolizing a status. A documentation strategy refers to the use of facts and figures to emphasize the value or quality of the service. This strategy is intended to document the scope, characteristics, performance record or effects of the service by providing concrete information or verbal tangible cues so that the benefits of the service can be easily understood. An example would be providing past performance data such as income statement, profit and loss statement and major awards.

Of Berry and Clark’s four tangibilization strategies, documentation, seems verbally oriented and, thus, not appropriate for examining a visual approach to tangibilization. The other three methods (visualization, association and physical representation) are visually oriented, suggesting the use of pictorial elements in services advertising. If a dry cleaner’s ad showed a picture of shirts or pants before and after the cleaning process, it would exemplify a visualization strategy. In this way, tangible cues can be made visual by providing distinct, specific information points related to tangible dimensions of the service. In general, the services literature suggests that a visual tangible cue or representation should be advantageous to service advertisers by providing observable means of tangibilizing an intangible offering (Stafford, 1996).

Cultural influences on services advertising

Advertising messages are often built on the shared cultural values of a particular society because culture is believed to be one of the influential factors affecting consumer attitudes toward advertising (Mooij, 2005). This idea coincides with the specialized approach to international advertising, suggesting that advertising should appeal to the unique cultural characteristics of a target country, which reflect consumers’ needs, tastes and desires (Frith and Mueller, 2003). Different ads, therefore, vary in the manner in which values get utilized across cultures because people in different cultures hold different values as salient (Albers-Miller and Stafford, 1999a). For example, advertising utilizes cultural values by simple association of services with qualities considered to be “good” within a society or the presentation of services and their users in contiguous relationships with ideal values of a society (McCracken, 1986).

Several studies have confirmed the persuasiveness of advertising messages that reflect dominant cultural values within the context of services advertising (Albers-Miller and Stafford, 1999a; Tai and Chan, 2001; Bang et al., 2005). Stafford (2005) argues that service advertising is considered more susceptible to the influence of culture as compared with goods advertising because of the human-interactive nature of services. Based on a content analysis of 800 magazine ads for two goods (office equipment and clothing/accessories) and two services (financial services and travel services) in the USA, Taiwan, Brazil and Mexico, Albers-Miller and Stafford (1999a) found that the use of rational vs emotional appeals differed across countries. In a separate study, Albers-Miller and Stafford (1999b) compared the use of advertising appeals across 11 countries by utilizing Pollay’s (1983) 42-item system. They found that although most services ads frequently used rational appeals, a significant cross-country difference existed in the use of rational and emotional appeals between services and goods ads. Specifically, when they compared the use of advertising appeals between utilitarian services and experiential services, there was more cross-cultural variation in the use of rational appeals used in the ads of utilitarian services. Conversely, for experiential services advertising,
more variation was observed across cultures in the use of emotional appeals.

In a recent study, Bang et al. (2005) compared the use of appeals and service quality dimensions in Korean services ads with those in US ads. They found that although the use of rational appeals did not significantly differ between the two countries, between-country variations existed in the use of service quality cues. Korean ads used tangible cues more often than did US ads, whereas US ads used empathy cues more frequently than did Korean ads. The cultural impact was also observed in the utilization of informational content in services advertising. Based on a shortened eight-category list of Resnik and Stern (1977), Tai and Chan (2001) examined the differences in the use of information content dimensions of services ads between the USA and Hong Kong. They found that Hong Kong services ads were significantly more informative than US ads, containing more “price” and “performance” cues.

Overall, these content analysis findings suggest that advertising appeal approach (i.e., emotional vs rational appeals) and information content (e.g., service quality claims and information cues) are differently utilized in services advertising across different cultural markets, providing ample evidence for the persuasiveness of advertising messages that reflect dominant cultural values of a target market in the context of services advertising. Although these findings help us improve academic knowledge on international services advertising, there has been little work investigating the use of visual tangible cues in services advertising. Furthermore, to our knowledge, there is no research that specifically examines this issue across international borders. Given the crucial role of visual components in services advertising as an observable means of tangibilizing services, the timing is now appropriate to extend the line of international services advertising research to the practical usage of visual tangible cues.

**Eastern and Western cultures**

Prior research has shown that among the several value dimensions of Hall’s (1976) theory, such as information contextuality, spatial differentiation, monochronic vs polychronic time and information flow, information contextuality effectively differentiates Eastern cultures from Western cultures (Kim et al., 1998; An, 2007). Based on the amount and degree of information context in the communication style, Hall (1976) classified cultures into high-context cultures where most information is already shared by people in the society and very little information is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message and low-context cultures where most of information is vested in the message and detailed background information is needed in the interaction with others. Much information remains unspoken and messages are delivered in an abstract, implicit and indirect manner in high-context cultures because dependence on the context is very high. In contrast, communication is straightforward, explicit and direct in low-context cultures because people convey messages directly with little need for context. Most of Eastern countries such as Japan, Korea, China and Arabian countries are high-context cultures where people have extensive information networks with family, friends and organizations. On the other hand, the USA, Germany, the UK, Switzerland, Scandinavia and other Northern Europeans are low-context cultures (Hall and Hall, 1990).

Hofstede’s (1980) theory of cultural differences also provides a conceptual basis to compare Eastern and Western cultures. Hofstede (1980) conceptualizes cultural dimensions, by which different cultures are effectively compared, in terms of power distance, individualism–collectivism, masculinity–femininity and avoidance of uncertainty avoidance. Among the four dimensions, power distance and individualism–collectivism are particularly relevant in differentiating Eastern cultures from Western cultures. Hofstede (2001) defines power distance as the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Because power distance influences how people deal with authority, the members of high power–distance cultures, such as Korea, Japan, China, France and Mexico, tend to accept wider status margins and be reluctant to disagree with authorities (Mooij, 2005). A strong dependency relationship is, thus, expected between firms and consumers in high power–distance cultures (Furrer et al., 2000). In contrast, in low power–distance cultures like the USA, Germany, Denmark and the UK, relationships are not as strong as those in high power–distance cultures because Western cultures value individualism and rejects hierarchic status, taking power distance or authority recognition as an uncomfortable proposition.

The contrast between individualism–collectivism can be defined as people looking after themselves and their immediate family only vs people belonging to in-groups that look after them in exchange for loyalty (Hofstede, 2001). In individualistic cultures, one’s identity is in the person and individualistic decisions are valued more highly than group decisions. In contrast, in collectivistic cultures, “we” consciousness is emphasized and goals, needs and views of the in-group are important. Hofstede (1980) suggests that most Western countries are individualistic, whereas Asian and Latin American countries are collectivistic.

**Hypotheses**

Moving beyond past research, this study intends to visualize a broader spectrum of differences in the use of visual tangible cues in corporate Web sites between two culturally distinctive groups of nations:

1. Eastern culture represented by China, Japan and Korea.
2. Western culture represented by the USA, the UK and Germany.

According to Hofstede (1980) and Hall (1976), China, Japan and Korea are characterized as large power distance, collectivistic and high information-context cultures, whereas the USA, the UK and Germany are characterized as small power distance, individualistic and low information-context cultures. These two cultural dimensions have often been cited as a theoretical basis to explain the differences in services advertising content between Eastern and Western cultures (Cutler and Javalgi, 1992; Albers-Miller and Stafford, 1999a; 1999b; Bang et al., 2005).

As this study focuses on the use of visual tangible cues, the baseline criteria for comparison consist of the types of visual functions utilized, the use of photographs vs illustrations and
the use of interactive elements, all of which have never been examined in the context of services advertising. While recognizing the importance of visual tangible cues in services advertising, this study finds it meaningful to examine the types of roles visual elements play in corporate Web sites. Additionally, an examination of what forms visual messages are delivered through may advance our understanding of current practices of Web site communications. And, given the human interactive nature of service encounters, a new understanding of the use of interactive elements provides insights into effective visual strategies for services on the Web.

Allowing that the intangible nature of services may require ad messages to heavily rely on visual tangible cues for the purposes of visualization, association and physical representation, evidence found in literature suggests that the effects of cultural values not be overlooked when comparing Eastern and Western advertising. A set of hypotheses are posed to expand the previous findings pertaining to the use of visual cues in services corporations’ Web sites.

Functions of ad visuals
The functions of advertising visuals are classified into two broad categories: literal and symbolic (Moriarty, 1987). Literal visuals are subcategorized into identification, description, comparison and demonstration, whereas symbolic visuals are put into the categories of association, association with a character or celebrity, metaphor, storytelling or esthetics. Literal visuals are used to communicate factual information to identify brand or service, describe service details, make comparisons with other brand or service and demonstrate how service works, while symbolic visuals communicate abstract images of brand or service through associations, metaphor, storytelling and esthetics (Moriarty, 1987).

Communication researchers have noted a strong orientation toward high-context communication style among Asian cultures, especially the Far East countries (Gudykunst et al., 1987; Kang, 1988). They suggest that Asian people tend to prefer indirect and non-obvious communication, which is reflected in an abundance of implicitness and indirectness in Asian languages, to the direct and obvious communication persistent in low-context nations. Differences in the major functions of advertising visuals between Eastern and Western cultures are, thus, speculated in light of the difference in communication patterns Hall’s (1976) information context theory suggests.

Previous studies have provided empirical evidence for such differences in services advertising. For example, in an analysis of magazine ads from Japan and the USA, Koga and Pearson (1992) found that metaphor or off-record (pictures only) strategy was used more frequently in Japanese ads than American ads. Similarly, Cutler and Javalgi (1992) found that US magazine ads used more direct description approaches than French ads, whereas French ads relied on indirect approaches, such as metaphors and esthetics. A few Web advertising studies also provided similar findings, although they did not exclusively examined services advertising. Based on Simon’s (1971) typology of advertising creative strategies, An (2006) revealed that Korean Web ads predominantly used “symbolic assertion” and “brand familiarization” strategies, whereas US ads for the most part used “information” and “obligation” strategies. The former ads were found to be supported by indirect mood-creating visuals, while the latter have addressed direct factual information about the advertised brand with the help of literal visuals. In addition, An (2007) found that Web ads for low-context cultures used more direct visual cues (i.e. physical representation through photographs) than did those of high-context cultures.

These findings suggest that cross-cultural difference exist in the utilization of major visual functions. However, considering the intangible nature of services, for which literal visuals seem to be appropriate for reducing the level of uncertainty, it is reasonable to assume that literal visuals are predominantly used in services Web sites. The first hypothesis is, thus, proposed to clarify this intricate relationship:

**H1a.** Global services brands’ local Web ads for Western cultures are more likely to use literal visuals than are those for Eastern cultures.

**H1b.** Global services brands’ local Web ads for Eastern cultures are more likely to use symbolic visuals than are those for Western cultures.

Photographs vs Illustrations
In low-context cultures, ideas are conveyed more concretely if delivered through straightforward, fact-based and realistic information (Hall and Hall, 1990), for which photographs are more effective than illustrations (An, 2006). The distinction between photographs and illustrations has provided a practical cue in differentiating the so-called hard- and soft-sell strategy. If the advertisers’ focus is on the direct delivery of factual information about the services advertised (i.e. hard-sell approach), photographs should work out better for an accurate description of the services than illustrations (Sivulka, 1998). Previous studies provide overall support for the use of photographs when the primary goal is to accurately describe the features or qualities of a service. For example, Moriarty (1987) showed that USA magazine ad contained more photographs instead of illustrations because realistic impressions are important in USA advertising. Photographs were also found to be an appropriate visual type in supporting literal functions of advertising visuals (An, 2006) and, thus, predominant in the ads of low-context countries (Cutler and Javalgi, 1992; Cutler et al., 1992).

Cutler and Javalgi (1992) and Cutler et al. (1992) found significant cross-cultural differences in the use of photographs and illustrations in magazine ads of the USA, the UK, France and Korea. They attributed such differences to the linkage between cultural value and major visual functions, explaining that photographs are an ideal visual type for low-context nations because realistic depictions are more emphasized in low-context cultures, whereas ads of high-context nations rely more on illustrations to deliver artistically decorated information. Thus, it seems that the contrast between photographs and illustrations fits well with Hall’s information context demarcation. The second hypothesis is posed to determine whether the use of photographs and illustrations varies in services Web sites between high-context and low-context nations:
H2a. Global services brands’ local Web ads for Western cultures are more likely to use photographs than are those for Eastern cultures.

H2b. Global services brands’ local Web ads for Eastern cultures are more likely to use illustrations than are those for Western cultures.

Interactive elements

Human interaction is considered one of the important aspects of services that customers take into account when evaluating services (Kandampully, 1998). Services ads, thus, often depict how customers interact with service employees to reinforce customer trust. For example, benefits or qualities of cruise line services are communicated through a picture showing a couple being served by the crew for a romantic dinner on deck on a moonlit evening. An additional way of facilitating customer–employee interaction is the use of technology-based interactive elements in the visual portion of messages. In tangibilizing services, the Web is considered more advantageous than other types of media because of its ability to utilize a variety of interactive functions, such as keyword search, service locator, clickable icons, audio-video links, chat rooms and discussion boards. These tools enable customers to have more control over the search and acquisition of information relevant for their decision making (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). For example, if customers have inquiries or suspicions about the service, they can be immediately and adequately handled by service providers through online problem diagnostics, Q&A’s, discussion boards or chat rooms. In order to facilitate customers’ tangibilization process, service providers often provide links to these interactive elements in the main visual portion of the service Webpage. A good example is the ING Insurance’s Web site, where links to service product search and customized service recommendations are provided in their main visual on the front pages of local sites.

The effect of culture on the depiction of these customer–employee interactions is speculated by Hofstede’s (1980) power distance theory. In high power–distance cultures, a firm dependency relationship is expected between service providers and customers (Furrer et al., 2000), whereas such relationships are not strong in low power–distance cultures. Because the distance between customers and service providers tends to be lessened in low power–distance cultures, more horizontal relationships can be created between the two groups. Brockner et al. (2001) found that members of a low power distance culture exhibited less favorable attitudes than those of a high power distance cultures when little opportunity is given to voice their own opinions. Specifically, regarding the use of information technology, Viega et al. (2001) showed that the implementation of information technology was augmented when it increased users’ sense of participation. These findings imply that the use of interactive elements that facilitate customer–service employee interactions may be influenced by the level of power distance:

H3a. Global services brands’ local Web ads for Western cultures are more likely to depict customer–employee interactions than are those for Eastern cultures.

H3b. Global services brands’ local Web ads for Western cultures are more likely to use technology-based interactive tools than those for Eastern cultures.

Hofstede’s (1980) individualism dimension suggests that individualistic decisions are valued more highly than group decisions in individualistic cultures because people in individualistic cultures are more likely to identify themselves as individual entities instead of group members. In contrast, people in collectivistic cultures place higher priority to group-centered goals than personal goals because people’s identity is based on the social system they belong to. Important relationships begin with family and extend to friends, colleagues, community and society, building strong ties that imply mutual goods (Kim et al., 1998). Customers in collectivistic cultures, thus, tend to rely more on group decisions than Western customers. This view has been empirically supported in previous studies. For example, Yun et al. (2008) found that Korean retail Web sites used more consumer review features (i.e. product rating and open-ended review features) than did American Web sites. Cho and Cheon (2005) also found that the Web sites of Korean and Japanese corporations used more consumer–consumer interactive elements than those of the USA and the UK. These findings suggest that Eastern services Web sites rely more on the visuals featuring actual customers recommending or patronizing the service:

H3c. Global services brands’ local Web ads for Eastern cultures are more likely to feature customers endorsing the service than are those for Western cultures.

Method

Sampling and unit of analysis

This study used quantitative content analysis, which is an appropriate method for examining advertising messages and mode of message presentation (Kassarjian, 1977) to produce counts of the frequency of the functions, format and characters utilized in the visual portion of the main ads appearing on the local Web sites of global services brands. Sample brands were selected from the 2011 Fortune’s list of the global 500 companies. First, among the 500 corporations, 305 non-services corporations were excluded. The availability of the links to country or regional Web sites was checked with the remaining 195 global corporations, resulting in the exclusion of additional 141 corporations. The Web sites of the remaining 54 corporations were then checked to see whether or not main visuals existed in the local sites’ front pages and identical visuals were used for all the countries linked. This process resulted in 43 corporations’ Web sites included in the final sample. Table 1 shows the number of sample corporations and the sample size for each of the six countries.

The unit of analysis was the first or the main visual appearing on the front page of local sites unless they appeared elsewhere on the entire site because the front page act like a “front door” to the entire Web site (Ha and James, 1998), containing the main ad or key visual messages targeted toward local consumers. Although corporations’ entire Web sites can be well qualified and treated as an ad (Singh and Dalal, 1999), physical aspects of the entire site are in many ways different
from what is traditionally considered an ad (e.g. magazine or newspaper ad). Thus, it is considered inappropriate for this kind of content analysis focusing on the visual elements.

**Coding categories and procedures**

Visual functions were coded using Moriarty’s (1987) classification system. The main visual was analyzed to determine if its function is literal or symbolic. If literal, it was further subcategorized into identification (brand, logo), description (how the service works, service attributes, schematics), comparison (between competitors) or demonstration (how the service is provided, made, used, etc.). Symbolic visuals were categorized into association (with characters, lifestyle, typical person and situation), metaphor, storytelling or esthetics (details become art). The use of photographs vs illustrations was simply coded by their presence (1) or absence (0) in the visual part of the

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<tr>
<td>495</td>
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<td>France</td>
<td>Food Services</td>
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**Table I** Sample corporations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Availability of local sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n 42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: O–site or visuals available, X–site or visuals unavailable; * Web site was under construction at the time of coding
messages. Interactive elements in the messages were divided into three categories: customer–employee interactions, technology-based interactive elements and customers endorsing the service. These three categories were coded again by presence (1) or absence (0).

Native speakers from the six subject countries who were enrolled at a large American public university were recruited as coders. The coders represent a wide variety social science majors, including marketing, management, advertising, sociology, journalism and communication studies. The coding instrument was initially developed in English and a back-translation procedure was followed to reduce the risk of equivalency threats to internal validity. Prior to the main coding task, four three-hour training sessions were given to the coders so that the coders became familiar with the definitions and operationalizations of the coding categories and variables using uniform instructions. Practice coding and relevant discussions were followed to detect and resolve definitional disagreements and coding discrepancies. To minimize the risk of bias, coders were asked to accept the information within the visual messages at face value during the procedure and not to question the truth or credibility of the messages.

After reaching overall agreement on each coding category, each coder independently coded 30 sample ads (five ads for each of the six countries). Agreement among the six coders’ evaluations was calculated to check whether it fell within the acceptance range of reliability. Because Web content is frequently updated or changed, the test page was coded by the next coder immediately after it was done by the first one. After each coding set, coders were given feedback and asked to recode the ads according to the final coding scheme. This process was repeated until an acceptable level of intercoder reliability was achieved using Scott’s pi formula. The intercoder reliability ranged from 88.7 to 98.5 per cent, all above the acceptable level of 90 per cent (Wimmer and Dominick 2007): 92.2 per cent for visual functions, 89.5 per cent for photographs vs illustrations, 88.7 per cent for customer–employee interactions, 92.2 per cent for technology-based interactive elements and 98.2 per cent for customers endorsing the service.

### Results

#### Literal vs symbolic visuals

H1 predicted the difference in the frequency of visual functions (literal vs symbolic) used in corporate Web sites between the two groups of nations. As shown in Table II, an aggregate descriptive analysis shows that the majority of services Web sites used literal visuals for description purposes (85 per cent of the total sample), followed by demonstration (30 per cent of the total sample). On the other hand, the largest portion of symbolic visuals was used for association purposes (30 per cent for association with characters and 22 per cent for simple association). When the use of literal vs symbolic visuals was compared, the result indicates that literal visuals were used significantly more than symbolic visuals: the average number of four literal functions – 1.47 (304 out of 207), the average number of five symbolic functions – 0.72 (150 out of 207). The sum of the use of visual functions was larger than the total number of sample because most Web site visuals examined in this study used moving visuals, which would contain a multiple number of visuals performing more than a single function. When the two groups of nations were compared, the average number of literal visuals used in Western services Web sites was 1.41 (SD = 0.95), which was larger than that of Eastern nations (M = 1.34, SD = 0.91). However, this group difference was not statistically significant, rejecting H1a (t = 0.714, df = 205, n.s.).

#### Symbolic visuals

Table II: Use of symbolic vs literal visuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual functions</th>
<th>United States (n = 42)</th>
<th>United Kingdom (n = 37)</th>
<th>Germany (n = 31)</th>
<th>China (n = 37)</th>
<th>Japan (n = 32)</th>
<th>Korea (n = 28)</th>
<th>Total (n = 207)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literal visuals</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td>6 (29)</td>
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<td>46 (22)</td>
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<td>35 (95)</td>
<td>23 (74)</td>
<td>30 (81)</td>
<td>25 (78)</td>
<td>24 (86)</td>
<td>175 (85)</td>
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<td>1 (1)</td>
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<td>14 (38)</td>
<td>12 (39)</td>
<td>10 (27)</td>
<td>9 (28)</td>
<td>7 (25)</td>
<td>63 (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>53</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td><strong>Symbolic visuals</strong></td>
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<td>7 (23)</td>
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<td>46 (22)</td>
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<td>Association with C</td>
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<td>11 (34)</td>
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<td>6 (19)</td>
<td>9 (32)</td>
<td>29 (14)</td>
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<td>4 (11)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country</strong></td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
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**Notes:** Numbers in the cell indicate the frequency of usage and percentages are in parentheses. For the group difference in the use of literal visuals, t = 0.714, df = 205, p = 0.476. For the group difference in the use of symbolic visuals, t = 3.149, df = 205, p < 0.01
However, regarding the use of symbolic visual, the results show that the average number of symbolic functions differed between the two groups. Eastern Web sites contained symbolic functions in 87 out of 97 sample pages (M = 0.90, SD = 0.75), whereas Western Web sites used symbolic functions only in 66 out of 110 sample pages (M = 0.60, SD = 0.65). This difference was statistically significant, supporting H1b (t = 3.149, df = 205, p < 0.01).

Additionally, individual countries were compared in order to identify between-country differences in the use of symbolic visuals. Based on the average number of symbolic visuals per ad, Tukey’s post hoc test was used. As shown in Table III, a significant between-country was found between the USA and China. The average number of symbolic visuals in USA Web sites was 0.52 (SD = 0.63), which was significantly smaller than that of Chinese Web sites (M = 1.05, SD = 0.78). Although the differences between other pairs of countries were not significant, the average numbers of symbolic visuals used in three Western nations were all smaller than those of Eastern nations, well conforming to high-context vs low-context groupings.

Photographs vs illustrations

H2 predicted the difference in the use of photographs and illustrations between the two groups of nations. The number of services Web sites using photographs and illustrations was compared with the total number of sample pages for each group. As presented in Table IV, photographs were the major type of visuals used in the Web sites of Western nations.

Table III Mean differences in symbolic visuals

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<td>Japan</td>
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<td>Korea</td>
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Table IV Use of photographs and illustrations

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<th>Illustrations</th>
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<td>18 (49)</td>
<td>23 (62)</td>
<td>32 (87)</td>
</tr>
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<td>12 (38)</td>
<td>20 (63)</td>
<td>24 (75)</td>
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<td>9 (32)</td>
<td>15 (54)</td>
<td>19 (68)</td>
<td>24 (86)</td>
</tr>
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<td>35 (36)</td>
<td>45 (46)</td>
<td>62 (64)</td>
<td>80 (82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84 (41)</td>
<td>53 (26)</td>
<td>70 (34)</td>
<td>154 (74)</td>
<td>123 (59)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Numbers in the cell indicate the frequency of usage and percentages are in parentheses. For the difference between Western and Eastern nations, χ² = 40.271, df = 2, p < 0.001. For the difference among the six nations, χ² = 47.435, df = 10, p < 0.001. *Percentages are based on the sum of the total number of photographs and illustrations.
Regarding the use of technology-based interactive tools, although the majority of sample Web sites utilized interactive tools, there was no significant difference between the two groups. The results indicate that 82 per cent of Western sites utilized interactions tools, whereas 75 per cent of Eastern sites did so. This difference was not statistically significant \((\chi^2 = 1.325, \text{df} = 1, p = 0.250)\), rejecting \(H3b\). Between-country differences were not found to be significant, either \((\chi^2 = 2.709, \text{df} = 5, p = 0.745)\).

Regarding actual customers’ endorsements of the service, the result shows that Eastern sites are more likely to do so than are their Western counterparts. Although only about 30 per cent of Eastern sites showed customers endorsing the service, Western sites did so in less than 10 per cent of the sample ads. This difference was significant \((\chi^2 = 13.390, \text{df} = 1, p < 0.001)\), supporting \(H3c\).

**Discussion and conclusion**

In an effort to unravel the intricacy of the use of visual tangible cues in international services advertising, this study examined the practice of visual strategies crafted in services corporations’ local Web sites. The local Web sites of global services corporations targeted toward the customers of six countries were examined with respect to the types of visual functions, the use of photographs vs illustrations and the use of interactive elements. As summarized in Table VI, this comparative study revealed a number of interesting findings.

First, regarding the utilization of visual functions, this study found that literal visuals were prevalent in corporate Web sites for both Western and Eastern markets. Unlike our hypothesis, there was no significant difference in the use of literal visuals between the two markets. Considering the effectiveness of rational approaches in services advertising (Albers-Miller and Stafford, 1999b; Stafford and Day, 1995), this finding can be viewed as a reflection of the tendency of services advertising to heavily rely on straightforward presentation of factual information about the service advertised. It appears that both Western and Eastern marketers took advantages of such literal visual functions as description and demonstration of the service in supporting their rational appeal strategies. The highly informational nature of the Web (Ducoffe, 1996) may be another reason for the predominant use of literal visuals in both markets.

However, this study discovered a clear pattern of discrepancy in the use of symbolic visuals between the two markets. It was found that Eastern marketers more frequently utilized symbolic visuals than did their Western counterparts. Specifically, among the five different types of symbolic visuals,
the gap was found significant in the use of association and metaphor functions. These two functions were more visible in Eastern markets. This finding can be explained by high- vs low-information context nature of the two markets. Because high-context Eastern cultures tend to rely on an indirect implicit communication style, visuals are more likely to portray the service and its features in an indirect way. By associating them with something symbolically meaningful or transmitting a metaphoric look, Eastern marketers may be able to fulfill their symbolic needs to create positive images when tangibilizing the service (Zhou et al., 2005). The situation seems to be the opposite for low-context nations, suggesting that visuals may need to support a direct and detailed description of the service. In other words, visuals for Western markets may work better if they assist in satisfying customers’ informational needs by describing or demonstrating the features, quality and performance of the service. It is, thus, suggested that services corporations’ Eastern Web sites hold the essential “characteristics” of high-context advertising – promoting services utilizing visuals that carry implicit indirect messages (e.g. showing family members on a vacation enjoying quality time together). A successful visualization strategy for Eastern markets, for instance, is to use visuals that associate a service with a particular person, situation or celebrity (Hill et al., 2004). In contrast, it seems that Western Web sites underutilize the potential of symbolic visuals to project symbolic value of a brand. Given the maturity of Western advertising, it is speculated that Western Web sites are not competent in this image-management technique, resulting in dependency on direct explicit messages supported by the literal visuals describing or demonstrating the services.

Second, the findings indicate that photographs are the primary visual type for low-context Western Web sites, whereas no particular type is representative of the high-context Eastern markets. Western services marketers appear to have addressed their need to make services more tangible by using visuals in the form of photographs. The relationship between the tone of advertising (hard- vs soft-sell) and information context value suggests that advertising in low-context nations prefers the hard-sell advertising approach with the use of provocative copy or visuals using aggressive or urgency appeal over the soft-sell approach with conciliatory persuasion messages or visuals. Although the soft-sell approach tend to rely on photographed images due to their “flexibility, versatility, realism and special effects”, photographs may work better when realistic expression of services should be emphasized in the hard-sell approach (Sivulka, 1998). This view is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Moriarty, 1987; Cutler et al., 1992; Cutler and Javalgi, 1992) that if the choice between a realistic expression and a depiction of brand personality or image is questioned, photographs would work better for the former objective in low-context cultures. On the contrary, although not prominent, illustrations were found to be more visible in Eastern markets, suggesting that Eastern marketers seem to be more concerned with an illustrative image or symbolic expression of services (Cutler and Javalgi, 1992). In fact, a considerable portion of Chinese and Korean ads utilized illustrated images and symbols in order to artistically decorate the service, customers and service employees. For example, the main visual of Deutsche Bank’s Chinese local site featured people practicing the Chinese martial art via illustrations to confer the sense of their “Passion to Perform.” The Korean local site of American Express promoted a travel package to Beijing by presenting an illustrated image of the Forbidden City (“Jiaotaidian”, Royal Palace) of China to create a mysterious mood. These findings imply that illustrations are advantageous when marketers wish to provide imaginative impressions of services personality, echoing with high-context Eastern cultures.

Third, the use of visuals to depict interactive aspects of services was examined based on three criteria:
1. the depiction of customer–employee interactions;
2. the use of technology-based interactive tools; and
3. the depiction of actual customers endorsing the service.

As hypothesized, the visuals of Western Web sites used customer–employee interactions more often than did Eastern sites. On the contrary, Western visuals less frequently portrayed customer endorsements than did Eastern visuals. More precisely, Eastern visuals were less likely to feature customers interacting with service providers, but were more likely to show customers addressing their experiences of using the service. Again, these findings are well explained by two distinct cultural characteristics of Eastern nations:
1. higher power distance (i.e. a larger gap between customers and marketers); and
2. collectivism (i.e. more reliance on other customers).

However, there was no significant difference in the use of technology-based interactive tools between the two groups. More than 80 per cent of the sample visuals utilized one or more of interactive tools, such as hyper links, personal choice helper, virtual reality display and keyword search. It seems that services marketers of both Western and Eastern markets have taken the full advantages of these interactive tools in helping customers obtain further information about the service. Given that interactivity and informativeness are considered most unique assets of the Web (Cho and Cheon, 2005), both Western and Eastern marketers seem to have recognized the advantages of technologically innovative interactive tools in enhancing the tangibility of services, which would facilitate customers’ engagement with rich information embedded in the Web sites. Interestingly, this study found that interactive tools were mostly located within the main visuals of Web sites, indicating that services marketers seem to effectively utilize visuals as a place to position interactive tools in an effort to increase the visibility of the links.

Overall, this study demonstrates the significant differences between Western and Eastern markets in terms of the use visual tangible cues in global services corporations’ Web sites and, thus, suggests that the idea of employing visual messages that reflect culture and communication styles of a particular national market appears to be a promising strategy for international service marketers. The findings imply that even the Web, which has been deemed a more global medium due to its universal access, is bound to culture. Although the findings do not directly address the issue of standardization vs localization, this study seems to support localization approaches in the utilization of visual tangible cues in services.
advertising. Furthermore, given a clear pattern of observed differences between Western and Eastern markets, instead of tailoring an ad to individual target countries, service marketers can benefit from grouping the target markets and using the standardized visuals within each group and, thus, can maximize advantages the standardized approach offers (e.g. reduction in production and operating cost, consistency and impact in building brand identity).

The findings of this study offer practical implications for global service marketers trying to build or reinforce strong brand images via corporate Web sites. First, Eastern marketers may need to avoid assertive direct visual cues. Visuals explicitly identifying brand/company name, providing detailed information (i.e. price, quality and performance of the service) or comparing other services may be disturbing when communicating with customers of Eastern markets. Instead, the Eastern style is to put greater emphasis on the associated images of services and mood-creating visual cues, such as cultural icons, beautiful scenery and animated stories, which may be better communicated in the form of illustrations. Instead of relying on customer–employee interactions, effective Eastern visuals may focus on featuring knowledgeable customers to share information with potential customers. In doing so, a variety of interactive tools need to be inserted into the visual to help tangibilize the service.

On the other hand, services marketers need to understand the assertiveness and directness of low-context cultures and how these characteristics relate to the use of visual tangible cues in Western markets. As the findings suggest, services marketers may want to rely more on visuals clearly displaying what the service is, what it contains and how it works by using photographs when approaching Western consumers. Given the importance of an emotional connection between customers and service providers in shaping customers’ perception of service quality (Strauss, 1999), Western visuals might benefit from displaying customer–employee interactions as a means of delivering service quality information, especially for high-involvement services. Like in Eastern markets, another alternative for improving tangibility in Western markets is to utilize interactive tools in their visuals.

Results of this study showed that the field of visual characteristics of service advertising remains a fertile one for research. Comparing different cultures and how cultural values are translated into visual differences is an endeavor that deserves more attention. This study is a first step that tries to establish the causal connection between culture and visual differences. Future study may achieve more precision by testing effects.

As many of global corporations have widely varied marketing arsenals and woven messages over multiple media channels (e.g. traditional media, cell phones, live events and handheld computers), cross-media research can provide more practical information on visual strategies for international services marketers. Due to the difficulty involved with obtaining a sampling frame for service corporations, the sample Web sites represented only 43 corporations, which are not completely representative of the population of interest. Accordingly, future studies should take a larger sample to overcome a possible threat to the external validity of the findings. In addition, because Hofstede (1980) and Hall’s (1976) cultural theories were based on the research begun more than 30 years ago and oriented toward Western thinking, more recent models, such as Schwartz (1991) and Triandis (1994), should be considered as a theoretical guideline for future research.

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Visual tangible cues in corporate Web sites

Daechun An


Further reading


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