



## วัฒนธรรมที่เน้นและไม่เน้นบริบท : การประยุกต์เพื่อการสื่อสารการตลาด High-Low Context Culture: Application for Marketing Communication

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้อภิปรายถึงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างวัฒนธรรมที่เน้นและไม่เน้นบริบท โฆษณาที่เน้นและไม่เน้นบริบท และคุณลักษณะของผลิตภัณฑ์ วัฒนธรรมที่เน้นบริบทจะเน้นการสื่อสารแบบอ้อมค้อมและการใช้วัจนะภาษา (เช่น ภาพ) ในทางตรงกันข้ามวัฒนธรรมที่ไม่เน้นบริบทจะมุ่งใช้การสื่อสารแบบตรงไปตรงมาและการใช้วัจนะภาษา เป็นที่คาดว่าโฆษณาในแต่ละวัฒนธรรมจะสะท้อนถึงรูปแบบการสื่อสารหลักๆของวัฒนธรรมนั้น นั่นคือโฆษณาที่เน้นบริบทจะเป็นที่แพร่หลายมากกว่าในวัฒนธรรมที่เน้นบริบท ในขณะที่โฆษณาที่ไม่เน้นบริบทก็จะแพร่หลายมากกว่าในวัฒนธรรมที่ไม่เน้นบริบท คุณลักษณะของผลิตภัณฑ์ (ที่เน้นความเพลิดเพลินทางอารมณ์ กับ ที่เน้นประโยชน์ใช้สอย) ก็ถูกคาดหวังว่าจะส่งอิทธิพลต่อการใช้โฆษณาที่เน้นและไม่เน้นบริบท เนื่องจากผลิตภัณฑ์ที่เน้นความเพลิดเพลินทางอารมณ์จะมุ่งความรู้สึกรื่นเริงประสบการณ์ที่ได้จากคุณลักษณะด้านอารมณ์ สุนทรียภาพ ประสาทสัมผัสและคุณลักษณะเชิงสัญลักษณ์ของผลิตภัณฑ์ ดังนั้นการใช้โฆษณาที่เน้นบริบทน่าจะแพร่หลายกว่าสำหรับผลิตภัณฑ์ประเภทนี้ ในทางตรงกันข้ามสำหรับแล้วผลิตภัณฑ์ที่เน้นประโยชน์ใช้สอยซึ่งเน้นประโยชน์จากการใช้งานตามหน้าที่ของผลิตภัณฑ์นั้น โฆษณาที่ไม่เน้นบริบทน่าจะแพร่หลายมากกว่าสำหรับผลิตภัณฑ์ประเภทนี้

### Abstract

The relationships of high-low context cultures, high-low context ads, and product characteristics are discussed in this paper. High-context culture emphasizes the use of indirect and nonverbal (such as visual) communication. In contrast, low-context culture values direct and verbal communication. It is expected that advertising in each culture will reflect the dominant style of communication. That is, high-context ads will be more prevalent in high-context culture while low-context ads will be more prevalent in low-context culture. Product characteristics (hedonic versus utilitarian) are also expected to influence the use of high- versus low-context ad appeals. Since hedonic products emphasize experiential pleasure derived from the affective, esthetic, sensory, and/or symbolic aspects of the products, the use of high-context ads should be more common for this type of product. Utilitarian products, in contrast, emphasize the functional usefulness of the products. As result, low-context ads should be more common for utilitarian products.

**คำสำคัญ:** วัฒนธรรมที่เน้นและไม่เน้นบริบท การสื่อสารการตลาด การโฆษณา

**Keywords:** High- vs. low-context culture, marketing communication, advertising

## Introduction

Marketers use advertising to persuade consumers to have a good attitude toward their advertisements. They hope that this good attitude will influence consumers to perceive their products as more favorable than those of competitors and finally make a decision to buy the advertised products.

An emerging issue in marketing is the need to find a way to deal with the simultaneous presence of global market and a world that continues to exhibit significant cultural differences (Taylor, 2000). Numerous studies have extensively examined the cross-cultural differences in marketing communication (e.g., Aaker, 2000; Aaker and Sengupta, 2000; Polyorat and Alden, 2005 ; Jung, Polyorat and Kellaris, 2009). Although the cultural dimensions from Hofstede's (2001) seminal work on work-related values (i.e., individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity) have provided a great deal of insight on how culture may influence marketing practices, they alone have not been sufficient to clarify the relationship between culture and marketing communication (Taylor, 2000). This is a truly daunting task on the level of attempt to develop a generalized theory of marketing, as understanding the relationship between marketing and culture would be highly valuable. More work toward developing theory on how culture influences marketing is greatly needed.

Individualism-collectivism has been found to provide a powerful explanatory framework for understanding cultural similarities and differences of communication in several countries. However this concept defines broad differences between cultures (Gudykunst, 1994). Other cultural dimensions that directly focus on

differences in communication styles may be particularly instrumental to understand marketing communication in a cross-cultural context.

The cultural dimension of high- versus low-context culture (Hall, 1976) is an evidently appropriate cultural dimension to be investigated in an advertising context. High-low context is a style of communication and thus can affect the persuasiveness of marketing communication. However, surprisingly, little has been done to examine the role of this cultural concept in advertising. Therefore, this paper attempts to fill in this void in the literature.

## Theoretical Background

### High -Low Context Communication.

This concept was first proposed by Hall (1976). Context, according to Hall (1987: p.7), is "the information that surrounds an event and is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event". And "A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code " (Hall, 1976 : p.91).

The above description suggests that a low-context message is very clearly communicated and specific (Andersen, 1994). Verbal communication is a more prominent form of low-context communication. Words contain most of the information to be sent. Messages must be explicitly stated: otherwise, the meaning will be lost. Members in this culture depend less on using non-verbal communication codes. Senders can

depend less on the receiver inferring the message from the context. This is one of the great distinctions between these two types of communication styles. In low-context communication, the focus is on words or on what is said, not who says it or how, when, or where it is said. Low-context Anglos tend to feel that explicit logical structures are the best for presenting ideas (Mead, 1998).

However, verbal message is considered just one source of information in high-context communication. Japanese is a good example. Japanese consider non-verbal communication as more important than verbal communication (De Mooij, 1994). That is, for high-context communication, very little information is transmitted in the verbal mode (Porter and Samovar, 1994) and consequently words are not regarded as the only main source of information. How, when, where, and by whom it is said are considered important and thus contribute to the real intention of that communication. In other words, for a high-context culture, a message is interpreted based not only on its contents but also on the situation or context which surrounds the message. The hidden or suggestive meaning that may be conveyed indirectly in the message may be important (Cundiff and Hilger, 1984). Therefore, in high-context cultures where communication is shared, a recipient of a message is likely to derive meaning from the context in which communication occurs.

Hall (1976) identifies the US, Germany, Scandinavian countries, and Switzerland as low-context. All these cultures appear to be individualistic given Hofstede's (2001) scores on the cultural dimension of individualism-collectivism. Japanese, Korean, and Chinese cultures, on the other hand, are at the high-context end of the continuum (Hall, 1976). These countries, again, appear to be collectivistic according to Hofstede's (2001) scores. As a consequence, it appears that low- and high-context communications are the predominant forms

of communication in individualistic and collectivistic cultures, respectively (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988).

The high-low context construct has gained support from advertising research mostly using a content analysis approach. For example, Shroeder's (1993) study showed that French ads were more high-context than those of their German counterparts. The result was consistent with the high-low context continuum described above. The German ads appeared to be more direct, explicit and fact-oriented than the French ads. In contrast, the French ads used a more non-verbal and implicit style. The result was consistent with the ranking suggested by Hall (1976) that Germans have a more low-context culture than the French.

Cho et al. (1999) studied the commercials in Korea and the U.S. As predicted, the results showed that U.S. commercials, relative to their Korean counterparts, used more direct approaches such as the emphasis on product features and characteristics, the explicit mention of competitive products, the use of comparative appeals, the addressing of the consumer's practical, functional, or utilitarian need for the product, and the use of numbers or graphics. In contrast, Korean ads were seen as more high-context. They emphasized emotion and mood, used metaphors or aesthetic expressions, associated a product with a particular situation or type of person or lifestyle, and addressed affective or subjective impressions of intangible aspects of a product.

Taylor, Miracle, and Wilson (1997) employed an experiment to compare the effectiveness of high-low context ads (operationalized as high versus low in information level) in high- versus low-context cultures (i.e., Korea and the U.S.). Consistent with expectations based on cultural differences, the U.S. subjects responded more favorably to commercials with high information levels than did the Korean subjects.

Although there are no clear guidelines for specific cultural rankings according to context, France is generally perceived to be a higher context culture than the U.S. (Campbell et al., 1988). That is, The French people tend to let their communicators' imagination and intuition infer the unsaid message. The French are also more interested in the general effect from the aesthetic point of view. Americans, on the other hand, are fond of directness and pay more attention to details. A number of empirical data support this difference in context. French ads used less direct tones than their American counterparts (Appelbaum and Halliburton, 1993). This finding was also replicated by Taylor, Hoy, and Haley (1996) using qualitative technique. In addition, French ads made greater use of emotional appeals and humor while American ads contained more informational cues (Biswas, Olsen, and Carlet, 1992).

Japanese ads were found to be more emotional and less comparative than American ads. However Japanese ads contained at least as many informational cues as did American ads (Hong, Muderrisoglu, and Zinkhan, 1987).

### **Relationship between Culture and Advertising**

Advertising can reflect culture. Advertising works as a potential method of meaning transfer by bringing consumer goods and a representation of the culturally constituted world together within the frame of a particular advertisement (McCracken, 1986). The creative director of an advertising agency seeks to conjoin these two elements in such a way that the viewer/reader glimpses an essential similarity between them.

As a result, cross-cultural differences should be found in advertising, a form of persuasive communication that is highly prevalent in many societies (Han and Shavitt, 1994). This paper examines how this cultural difference in communication style is likely to be reflected

in the types of advertising appeals employed in two different cultures.

Consistency between advertising styles and cultural orientation can be expected. It is reasonable to assume that those who are attempting to persuade others will "select approaches consistent with their own past experiences within the cultures to which they belong, and that they are selected, in part, on the basis of their ability to handle a style congruent with the culture" (Glenn, Witmeyer, and Stevenson, 1977 : p.53). That is, advertising is a cultural phenomenon, culturally inspired and created within the expectations of a culture (Taylor, Hoy and Haley, 1996)

In addition, previous research has found consistency between national culture and the prevalence of an ad appeal. For example, Han and Shavitt (1994) found that individual-focused ads were more prevalent in an individualist culture (the U.S.) while group-focused ads were more common in a collectivist culture (Korea). Alden, Hoyer and Lee (1993) studied the effect of culture in terms of individualism/collectivism and power distance on humorous advertising and found that the ad appeals were generally consistent with the national cultures. That is, ads in collectivistic cultures (Korea and Thailand) had more group-oriented situations than ads in individualistic cultures (Germany and the U.S.). In terms of power distance, ads in high power distance cultures (Korea and Thailand) had more characters of unequal status than ads in low power distance cultures (Germany and the U.S.).

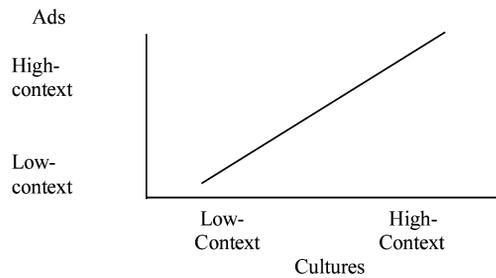
The U.S. and Thailand will be selected as focal countries in this articles. The US, according to Hall (1976) as well as other previous studies, is a low-context culture. Thailand, as a country in Southeast Asia, is considered a high-context culture, although no systematic empirical research has been done in this country. However, insights from Pornpitakpan (2000)

suggested that Thai communication is high-context. For instance Thais will not specify the ‘subject’ or ‘object’ of the sentence if these are implied in the context, whereas Americans can be easily confused if these are not clearly specified. Furthermore, Thais seem to be better than Americans at reading another party’s mind and detecting the unsaid cues probably because Thai communication style was more relationship oriented as Thai people were relatively concerned with maintaining relationships with the group rather than getting a task accomplished (Chaidaroon, 2004). Chaidaroon (2003) also argues that there were times when Thai people remained silent or did not express their intentions explicitly in order to gain respect from their interlocutors. These behaviors are one form of conversational indirectness which is strategically performed for a unique purpose in a high-context culture.

Accordingly, advertisements in Thailand are likely to be more indirect and implicit. They tend to use more emotional cues than ads in the US. The use of Thailand as a high-context culture would extend previous research to cover this geographical area.

Given the above discussion regarding the contextual difference and the consistency between ad appeal and culture, one would expect styles of communication used in advertising to differ between the two cultures. More specifically, in a high-context culture like Thailand, the ads will predominantly use indirect ways of communication, emotion-focused appeal, and nonverbal cues. On the other hands, advertisement in low-context culture would convey information in a concrete, explicit, and direct manner. This relationship is graphically displayed in Figure 1.

**P1: Ads in high-context culture (Thailand) will be more high context than ads in low-context culture (the U.S.).**

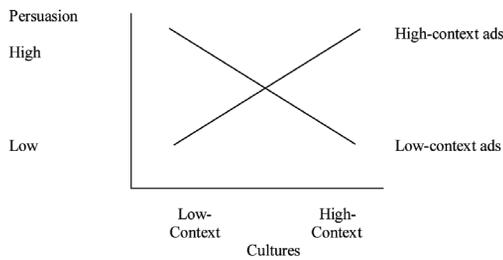


**Figure 1:** The prevalence of ad styles in high- versus low-cultures

A consumer who is exposed to a specific culture becomes committed to that culture’s style of thinking and feeling. Value systems, attitudes and even perception processes are all culturally influenced (Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkhan, 1987). Given the contextual differences between Thai and U.S. cultures, one would expect the effectiveness of advertising styles to differ. In a high-context culture like Thailand, viewers would not be likely to react positively toward commercials containing direct and explicit messages which point out product features or benefits. Thais would be more inclined to rely on the contextual elements (e.g., mood and tone) in a commercial and less on direct, explicit claims than the U.S. Consumers. Conversely, U.S. viewers would more likely than Thais to react positively to commercials with direct message. These relationships are graphically displayed in Figure 2.

**P2a: High contexts ads will more effective in a high-context culture (Thailand) than in a low-context culture (the U.S.).**

**P2b: Low Context ads will be more effective in a low-context culture (U.S.) than in a high-context culture (Thailand).**



**Figure 2:** The effectiveness of ad styles in high- versus low-cultures

Although the prevalence of ad styles is expected to vary cross-culturally, other factors could also have an impact on the extent to which high- versus low-context ads will be used. Product characteristics are one factor that has been found to have a moderating effect on the extent to which the ad appeal of individualism-collectivism has been used (Han and Shavitt, 1994). As a consequence, there is a need to compare advertising by specific product category (Biswas, Ollsen and Carlet 1992). Utilitarian versus hedonic products are the classification which has a potential to influence the use of high- versus low-context ads.

### Utilitarian versus Hedonic Products

There is a distinction between these two types of product characteristics. On one hand, utilitarian products are concerned with the functional/instrumental usefulness of the products which is derived from the performance of the products. They provide the customer value by being a means to an end (Chandon, Wansink, and Laurent, 2000). They do not have either positive or negative affects (Youn et al., 2001). Office supplies, batteries (Youn et al., 2001), calculators, cameras, antacids, weighing scales, electric blankets (Hsu and Monroe, 1998) fall into this category. These products can be viewed as predominantly serving a utilitarian function. Polyorat (2011) extend this construct to the area of academic institution marketing. The primary

benefit of a university, as an educational institution, should reflect the utilitarian motive where consumers (i.e., students) come to study, seek knowledge, augment their intellectual capabilities, and prepare themselves for future careers.

On the other hand, hedonic products are concerned with the experiential pleasure derived from the affective, esthetic, sensory, and/or symbolic aspects of that product. (Batra and Ahtola, 1991; Voss, Spangenberg and Grohmann, 2003; Hsu, 2000). They are non-instrumental and experiential. They are appreciated for their own sake, without further regard to their practical purposes (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Hedonic products are sometimes called value-expressive products. They carry symbolic or expressive qualities, which leads to the users' social and psychological interpretation of the product (Kim and Kang, 2001). For example, a consumer thinking about a product such as an exotic sport car may associate with an image of the stereotypical driver who is young, attractive, modern, affluent, swinging, and single (Johar and Sirgy, 1991).

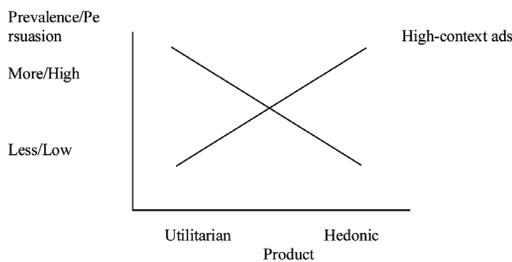
The distinction between these two product types has several marketing implication. For example, in the area of branding, an experimental study by Ang and Lim (2006) reveals that brand of symbolic or hedonic products (cologne and a designer watch) are perceived to be more sophisticated and exciting but less sincere and competent than those of utilitarian products (mineral water and toothpaste).

The above descriptions and the items in utilitarian-hedonic scales (Batra and Ahtola, 1991; Voss, Spangenberg and Grohmann, 2003) suggested the possible relationship between product characteristics and high-low context ads. Some of the terms reflecting utilitarian dimensions include usefulness, practicality, functionality, helpfulness, efficiency, handiness, pro-

ductivity, problem-solving, and effectiveness. In order to communicate these attributes, it is likely that the message needs to be clear and specific. In addition, a verbal message is necessary to make the audience understand the informational aspects of the products. These characteristics of the message are consistent with the idea of a low-context communication style. As a result, it is hypothesized that low-context ads are more prevalent for utilitarian products than high-context ads. Furthermore the match between advertising style and product characteristics should be found in ad effectiveness, as well. These relationships are graphically displayed in Figure 3.

**P3a: Low-context ads, versus high-context ads, are more prevalent for utilitarian products**

**P3b: Low-context ads, versus high-context ads, are more effective for utilitarian products.**



**Figure 3:** The prevalence / effectiveness of ad styles for hedonic versus utilitarian products

Hedonic product appeals, in contrast to utilitarian product appeals, emphasize the feelings of pleasantness, agreeableness (Batra and Ahtola, 1991), delight, sensuousness, fun, thrilling, enjoyableness, and amusement (Voss, Spangenberg and Grohmann, 2003). These attributes would be difficult to convey through a direct and clear message. Instead, ambiguous messages intended to evoke feelings would be more appropriate. Moreover, the sensory aspects of hedonic product appeals are hard to evoke by words alone. Consistent with the concept of imagery (McInnis and Price, 1987), a

visual message, as compared to a verbal message, can facilitate the use of imagery processing to experience the product attributes. Thus the inclusion of visual components in ads will stimulate more sensory appeals. The use of ambiguous, emotional and nonverbal or visual communication is consistent with high-context communication, thus it is hypothesized that high-context ads are more prevalent for hedonic products. In addition, this line of reasoning should be extended to ad persuasiveness. That is, high-context ads are more effective for hedonic products than low-context ads. These relationships are graphically displayed in Figure 3.

**P4a: High-context ads, versus low-context ads, are more prevalent for hedonic products.**

**P4b: High-context ads, versus low-context ads, are more effective for hedonic products.**

**Conclusion**

Culture is expected to have a crucial impact on the effectiveness of different ad styles. However product-related factors such as product characteristics in terms of hedonism and utilitarianism are hypothesized to moderate the cultural influence.

This paper makes both theoretical and managerial contributions to the consumer behavior area. From the theoretical point of view, this paper studies high-low context culture/communication which is an underexamined cultural dimension. In addition, this paper suggests how product characteristics in terms of utilitarianism and hedonism can affect the ad persuasiveness. Altogether this paper suggests that culture must be unpackaged and more rigorously understood, both in its nature and its relationship to cognitive processes and behavior (Fischer, 2009).

In terms of managerial implication, this paper can provide guidelines on how to implement marketing communication strategies in high-context cultures in

general, and in Thailand in particular. Thailand does not receive much attention from consumer researchers although it is becoming an important player in the Asian, and perhaps global, economy. Despite its recent economic downturn, it is an attractive market to invest in and trade with because of its market size and minimal interference from the government. Becoming acquainted with the characteristics of the Thai culture in terms of communication style can certainly aid business executives. The knowledge of this cultural difference can have far-reaching implications for doing business in Thailand (Pornpitakarn, 2000). In addition, the results from this study will shed additional light to the previous observation by Chirapravati (1996) that there have been two distinct styles of Thai advertisements. One is the use of emotional or soft-sell approach and the other is the use of cultural themes. The reason behind these two approaches may come from the fact that Thailand is a high-context culture.

Given the conceptual nature of this paper, empirical studies are strongly encouraged to verify the suggested proposition. For example, a set of 2 studies may be conducted to examine the proposed relationships. The first study may use content analysis to examine the extent to which high- versus low-context ads have been used in high- versus low-context cultures (Proposition 1) and the extent to which high- versus low-context ads have been employed in hedonic versus utilitarian products (Propositions 3a and 4a). The second study may employ an experimental design to study the effectiveness of high versus low context ads for high- versus low-context people (Propositions 2a and 2b) under different types of products (Propositions 3b and 4b). One approach to operationalize a high- versus low-context advertisement in an experimental study could be through the use of narrative versus factual ad copy (Polyorat, Alden and Kim, 2007). In this light, because there have been relatively

fewer experimental studies in comparison with content analysis and survey research in the cross-cultural advertising research (Okazaki and Mueller, 2007), more experimental research will thus provide a more complete comprehension of the cultural role in advertising (Moon and Chan, 2005; Taylor, 2005).

Finally, future research may seek to examine whether the propositions in this paper may also be applicable in other Asian countries that are suggested to be a high-context culture such as Laos (Polyorat and Khantuwan, 2008) and Singapore (Polyorat, Chaidaroon and Kamondetdecha, 2010).

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