Investigating the Interactive Effects of Visual Imagery and Brand Familiarity on Brand Recall: a Cross-Cultural Study

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The authors address the issue of visual imagery in cross-cultural consumer research. The relationship between visual imagery, brand familiarity, and brand claim recall is investigated in two distinct cultural environments – the U.S. and Russia. The paper consists of two studies that explored imagery potency from the point of view of memory-evoking effects. The obtained results suggest that image-intensive tools generate different returns depending on the level of brand familiarity and cultural media. The research findings may be of interest to marketing scientists studying cross-cultural consumer behavior as well as to managing practitioners operating in international advertising and global brand building.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The issue of visual imagery in cross-cultural consumer research is addressed in the study. It investigates the relationships between the brand familiarity, visual imagery of an ad, and the brand claim recall in two distinct cultural environments—the U.S. and Russia.

A substantial research in cognitive psychology and consumer behavior is devoted to exploring sources, nature, specific features, and memory outcomes of human imagery. Memory recall is documented to be higher if associated with more intensive visual imagery activity rather than under conditions that are believed to be less imagery stimulating (Paivio and Csapo 1969; Elliott 1973; McKelvie and Demers 1979; Rossiter and Percy 1980; LaBarbera, Weingard, and Yorkston 1998). Therefore, the improving recall of ad contained information for imagery-intensive ads is hypothesized.

Another hypothesized effect is a positive relationship between the level of brand familiarity and brand claim recall. The evidence for this relationship is provided by the signal detection and information organization theories as well as by the recent research on message processing and message response (e.g., Campbell and Keller 2003; Sagarin et al. 2002; Campbell and Kirmani 2000). The interaction between the two factors discussed above is considered as well.

Based on the cross-cultural consumer behavior and advertising research, it was proposed that there will be the difference between Russian and American consumers in terms of advertising image elaboration and, therefore, in relationship between imagery and brand claim recall.

The 2 x 2 factorial between subjects experimental design with two manipulated conditions—brand familiarity and imagery content of the ad—was applied in Study 1. The two chocolate brands—American (A) and Russian (R)—both of which operate on the U.S. and Russian markets, were chosen for the experiment. Two ads, one consisting of picture and text, and the other one consisting of text only, were created for each brand.

The students filled the questionnaire measuring the brand familiarity for brands they were assigned to, then rated the visual imagery level of ads. Then subjects were given a surprise claim recall test on the ads.

A two-way ANOVA followed by post-hoc tests produced the results that indicate at significance of both imagery and familiarity main effects as well as interaction effect (higher marginal influence of imagery on lower rather than on higher level of brand familiarity).

The Study 2 was conducted in two countries—USA and Russia. Each subject was randomly assigned to one of the treatments (HF/HI, HF/LI, LF/LI, and LF/HI). The 2 x 2 factorial between—subjects experiment was designed with three manipulated conditions—a subject’s country of domicile, brand familiarity and imagery content of the ad. The same chocolate brands—Brand A and Brand R—were used. Attitude towards brand score ($A_B$) was measured as well.

An ANCOVA with $A_B$ score as covariate was applied. The main effects of imagery rating and brand familiarity on brand recall remained to be significant after removing the covariate’s effect. The higher imagery effect under low rather than high familiarity conditions was demonstrated as well. The significant 3-way interaction between country of domicile, brand familiarity, and imagery rating reveals different pattern of marginal influence of the imagery on brand claim recall for high familiarity vs. low familiarity conditions in two cultures. While in the U.S. imagery has much higher contribution to brand recall on low levels of brand familiarity, in Russia the difference of this contribution for high and low familiarity conditions is much less substantial.

To summarize, the Studies 1 and 2 provided highly significant support for brand familiarity and imagery effects on brand recall. Their interaction (higher contribution of imagery to brand claim recall on low rather than on high levels of brand familiarity) was supported by both studies as well. The significant differences of imagery influence on brand recall score in two countries was revealed by the significance of corresponding interactions. The difference of brand familiarity’s influence on brand recall across two cultures was not supported.

The obtained results have important implications for both academic and practitioner research. The findings reported in this study attract attention to the issue of information processing resources that exist in consumer mind. The high level of brand familiarity creates the strong brand-related schema, that can use the cognitive capacity and interfere in the elaboration of the new image-evoked information. In contrary, the absence (or weakness) of such a schema for unfamiliar brands increases the availability of cognitive resources needed for image elaborating activity (Carlston 1980; Britton and Tesser 1982; Kardes 1986).

The study also demonstrates that the process of elaboration of image-initiated information is strongly influenced by social media. The need for image processing appears to be a cultural phenomena, that is influenced by spiritual traditions of the country, its media habits and dominating lifestyle. The strong cultural predisposition to reading the books and newspapers result in lower level of need for visualization, while media habits oriented at watching TV and reading colorful magazines create image-based information elaboration pattern. The associative links evoked by images result in higher attribute recalling abilities for consumers from image-intensive media environments, like USA. In contrast, consumers from reading-intensive environments, like Russia, have higher predisposition to elaborate textual rather than imagery information contained in the ad.

From managerial point of view, the study demonstrated that investment in image-intensive advertising will not produce the same return for different levels of brand familiarity and different international markets. The well established brands with higher familiarity rating require different communication strategies aimed at facilitating brand claim recall than low familiar ones. Image-intensive tools generate diminishing returns with increasing brand familiarity. The companies that are going global should also evaluate the degree of image intensiveness of the environments they are going to operate within. This is needed for assessing the “imagery advertising leverage” that global businesses will have in the particular culture.

REFERENCES


