

"No liquor commercials analysed were classified as informative" What do your TVCs have to say?

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There has been a long debate between advertisers and critics over the function of advertising. Is advertising designed to inform or to persuade?

Television, which accounted for 45 per cent of the HK\$1.1 billion adspend last year (SRC), is a crucial medium for advertisers and public policy makers.

Do TV commercials contain information value? Are they used to persuade and to promote irrational purchase decisions?

Empirical investigation on the content of advertising information offers us a better understanding of the messages communicated through TVCs and provides factual grounds for evaluating advertising standards in Hong Kong.

Analysis of this nature was first introduced by Resnik and Stern (1977). They established a categorisation system based on 14 criteria, which represented all categories of information potentially useful to consumers.

A TVC was classified as informative if it contained at least one of the 14 information cues. In the Resnik & Stern (1977) study on TVCs, only 49 per cent of the sampled 378 commercials in the US contained at least one of the information cues and were therefore considered to be informative.

In a replication study in 1986, Resnik & Stern (1991) found that 51 per cent of the sampled 340 spots were informative.

Resnik & Stern's criterion on information content in television commercials was later adopted in similar studies of print advertising in the US (Laczniak 1979; Stern, Krugman and Resnik 1981; Healy

and Kassajian 1983; Harmon, Razzouk and Stern 1983; Chon, Franke and Wilcox 1987). Cross-cultural studies of print and television advertising employing the Resnik-Stern typology were also conducted in the UK (Taylor 1983),

Japan (Madden, Caballero and Matsukubo

1986; Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkhan 1987), China

(Rice and Lu 1988), Australia (Dowling 1980),

Canada (Pollay, Zaichkowsky and Fryer 1980) and

Ecuador (Renforth and Raved 1983).

The current study is designed to investigate the information content of Hong Kong TVCs and analyse how the information content varies by charac-

teristics of the TVCs, such as duration, broadcast station, day and time, and the product category.

• Definition of advertising information
This study adopts the established Resnik and Stern (1977) information classification system, which consists of 14 criteria (see below, left). These criteria identified informative cues about the product, service or institution which could potentially be used in intelligent purchase decisions.

The TVCs were taken at face

value, without subjectively evaluating credibility, deceptiveness or truthfulness.

• Sampling frame
A total of 341 commercials broadcast by the four commercial TV stations (TVB Jade and Pearl,

results indicated that the most commonly featured information cues were: availability, performance, components/content, quality, special offers and price.

All other cues appeared in small proportions (less than five per cent of the TVCs).

INFORMATION BY PRODUCT CATEGORY

Product Category	No. of Commercials	% of Informative Commercials*	% of Non-Informative Commercials
Non-durables	48	69	31
Servicing/Retailing	152	59	41
Food & Beverages	51	59	41
Durables	75	53	47
Liquor	15	0	100

Notes: a) Chi-square value equals 23.1; significance < 0.001
b) *: Commercials with at least one informative cue

INFORMATION CONTENT OF TV COMMERCIALS

No. of Information Cues	No. of Commercials	% of Sample
0	149	43.6
1	89	26.1
2	66	19.4
3	31	9.1
4	4	1.2
5	2	0.6

ATV Home and World) were included in this study. A multistage sampling procedure was used to select viewing days, television channel and broadcast time within those days, for the period December 1-8, 1993.

If identical commercials appeared more than once in the same language channel, only the first appearance would be analysed.

The following information was content analysed: the station, day and time of broadcast, product category and which information cues were communicated.

Two researchers were employed to view the tape commercials independently. They were not rushed and the commercials could be scrutinised as often as needed.

An inter-coder reliability level of 96.7 per cent was obtained on all the information cues coded. Clearly defined criteria and careful training contributed to the high reliability level.

• Results

More than half (56 per cent) of the sampled commercials contained one or more information cues, 30 per cent contained two or more cues and 11 per cent contained three or more cues. The mean number of information cues for the sample was 1.0.

Table 3 shows how frequently each cue appeared in the TVCs. The

The reason was shorter commercials usually adopted a direct copy approach and were more likely to contain information cues on price, availability and special offer.

• Conclusion

There is still room for improvement in television advertising in terms of providing more information cues, as well as more types of information.

In the sampled commercials, the high proportion of information on special offers and availability may be due to the increasing number of direct response TVCs.

A higher proportion of information on special offers was found as many department stores launched their Christmas and clearance sales at the end of the year.

The lack of information about taste, packaging and safety calls for improvement in these areas.

The findings show that the shorter commercials are more likely to be informative.

So, lack of information is probably due to copy approach, rather than time constraint.

Besides, the results indicate the lack of information in liquor TVCs may suggest either the advertisers have not much to inform the consumers about, or the purchase decision on these products are irrational.

Public policy decision makers should take a closer look at this area.

It is hoped that this study will trigger discussion on the content of TVCs. As the information cues analysed are mainly from the marketer's standpoint, further research on the the "perceived information value" from the consumer's point of view will provide us a more complete picture on the marketing communication process and information utilisation by the consumer.

TYPE OF INFORMATION IN TV COMMERCIALS

Information Cue	No. of Commercials Containing the Cue	% of Sample
Availability	72	21.1
Performance	66	19.4
Components/contents	60	17.6
Quality	53	15.5
Special offer	39	11.4
Price	23	6.7
Independent research	9	2.6
Guarantees/Warrantees	6	1.8
New ideas	6	1.8
Nutrition	5	1.5
Company research	1	0.3
Taste	0	0.0
Packaging	0	0.0
Safety	0	0.0

EVALUATION CRITERIA

1. Price: cost of the product, value-retention capability
2. Quality: objective evaluation of workmanship, engineering, durability, excellence of material, structure superiority, special service
3. Performance: function of the product
4. Components/contents: ingredients, composition, ancillary items
5. Availability: place of purchase, availability period
6. Special offer: limited time non-price deals
7. Taste: superiority of taste in test by a sample of potential customers
8. Nutrition: specific data of nutritional content
9. Packaging: how packaging is more desirable than alternatives
10. Guarantees/warrantees: post-purchase assurance
11. Safety: safety features
12. Independent research: research done by independent firm
13. Company research: research done by advertiser
14. New ideas: new product concepts

Note: Each commercial can have more than one information cue