

## **Political Spot Advertising: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of the 1996-2004 Presidential Campaigns in Taiwan and the U.S.**

Po-Chung Chuang, Chinese Culture University, Taiwan

### **Abstract**

By conducting a content analysis, 606 political spots associated with the 1996-2004 presidential campaigns in Taiwan and the US are compared in an effort to explore how cultural differences may influence creative strategies within a venue of negative political advertising. The results demonstrate Taiwanese and American presidential hopefuls are “more different than alike” in their ads with respect to the use of negative appeals, types of negativity, and negative production techniques. The implication is that despite similar democratic political systems, cultural differences play an important and striking role in the practice of indigenous political spot advertising. Political spots are generally reflective of the cultural orientations in which they occur.

### **Purpose and Significance**

Creative strategy is a policy or guiding principle that specifies the general nature and character of messages to be designed in advertisements (Frazer, 1983). As the heart of great advertising, a creative strategy mirrors important cultural meanings. Since content (what is said) and execution (how it is said) are the two key elements of creative strategy (Laskey, Day, & Crask, 1989), the primary concern of this comparative research project lies in the cultural aspects of message content and message execution in negative political advertising in two different cultures. The goal is to analyze and compare Taiwanese and American ads in an effort to explore how cultural differences influence negative advertising.

In this study, the researcher will present a way of looking at communication by analyzing the assumptions in Taiwanese culture, and comparing them with the cultural assumptions underlying their U.S. counterparts. More specifically, this study will examine the usage of negative political spots from the 1996-2004 Taiwanese and American presidential campaigns in order to compare the cultural aspects depicted in each.

Research significance hinges on two considerations. First, the findings eventually reported here may better and further establish the notion that political advertising reflects the uniqueness of an indigenous culture in which it appears, as business advertising does. Second, by conducting a study of comparative political advertising, it is possible to extend the scope of our understandings about advertising research in the political field. Such an inquiry is meaningful for both academic and practical reasons.

### **Why Compare Taiwan with the U.S.?**

This research contrasts Taiwan with the U.S. for several reasons. Most important, the United States is regarded as the leading Western culture, and Taiwan can serve as a solid representative of Eastern culture. In fact, the bulk of the comparative studies of cultural

content in business advertising have used the United States as either a "reference frame" or a "model" of Western culture. Only through a comparison with political advertising in the United States can the "Westernness" and "Easternness" of political advertising in Taiwan be convincingly decided.

In addition, the rationale for analyzing televised political commercials is that television is the largest advertising medium in both countries. The choice of presidential campaigns instead of other local elections in Taiwan and the U.S. is based on the fact that these elections are equivalent and significant contemporary events within both cultural settings.

### Literature Review

**Cultural Assumptions.** Since culture is a major parameter in a political system, the use of cultural concepts or dimensions to explain differences in political advertising between two cultures is consistent with the often-expressed belief that consumers' responses to business advertising are influenced by their cultural norms (Muellar, 1987). Two cultural considerations appear to be particularly relevant to this study because they impact societal communication patterns and suggest that political advertising in Taiwan and in the United States are different. Specifically, they are: (1) the degree to which the cultures are high or low in context (borrowed from anthropologist Edward T. Hall's (1976) concept of cultural differentiations), and (2) the degree to which the cultures are individualistic or collectivistic in orientation (taken from organizational psychologist Geert Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of cultural variability).

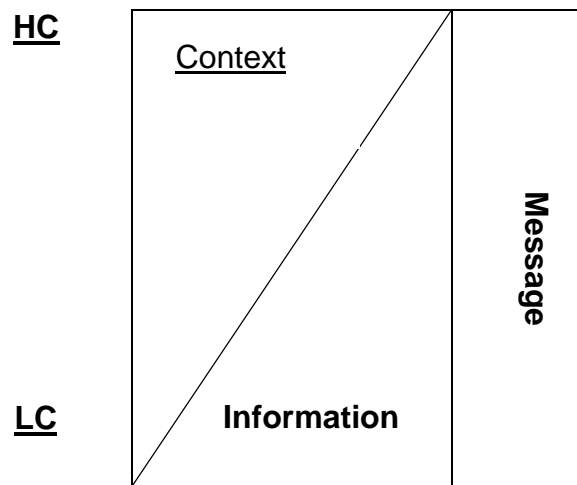
Throughout his book, *Beyond Culture*, Hall (1976, p. 39) proposed that the dimension of high versus low context is a way of understanding cultural orientations. In his view, a high-context (HC) culture is one in which people are deeply involved with one another. As a result of intimate relationships among people, a structure of social hierarchy exists, wherein individual inner feelings are kept under strong self-control, and information is widely shared through simple messages with deep (implicitly understood) meaning. In contrast, a low-context (LC) culture is one in which people are highly individualized, relatively disconnected, somewhat alienated and fragmented, have relatively little involvement with others, and meaning tends to be explicit.

In addition, when facing confrontation, people in HC cultures are more likely to repress their own feelings and interests to maintain harmony. Also, because the bonds between people are so strong, there is a tendency to allow for considerable bending of the system. In contrast, LC culture people are less likely to avoid direct and open confrontation at the expense of expressing and defending the self (Hall, 1976, p. 159). Criticism is more direct and is formally recorded. In HC cultures, however, criticism is more subtle and verbal; "what is not being said can carry more meaning than what is said" (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 1990, p. 134).

Hall (1976, p. 101) clearly considered Taiwan and the U.S. to be representatives of the HC and the LC cultures respectively. His dimension is quite useful because it characterizes how people in a culture relate to one another, especially with respect to communication patterns. This concept may be easily explained by the following model: HC transactions feature preprogrammed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message. LC transactions, however, are the

reverse. Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to compensate for what is missing in the context (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Hall's HC-LC Communication Model**



Source: Hall (1976, p. 102).

Literature based on Hall's model also suggests that there is a distinct difference between the contextual levels of Eastern and Western cultures (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998; Tak, 1993; Taylor, Miracle, & Wilson, 1997). Given the contextual differences between Taiwan and U.S. cultures, one would expect communication styles used in political spots to be similarly different between the two countries.

In addition to Hall's concept, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension can be applied to cross-cultural advertising research, even though it has rarely been adopted before. Recently, researchers in marketing have begun to use Hofstede's model of culture as a framework for testing cross-cultural differences (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996). In his comprehensive empirical study of work-related values, Hofstede identified four major dimensions of cultural variability: (1) Individualism (IDV), which is the degree to which members of a society perceive themselves as separate from others; (2) Power Distance (PDI), or the degree to which people automatically accept the unequal distribution of power; (3) Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), the degree to which people are able to tolerate uncertainty and risk in everyday life; and (4) Masculinity (MAS), which refers to the degree of value placed on aggressive and materialistic behavior.

Individualism is the major dimension of cultural variability which serves to explain cross-cultural differences in communication behavior. Hofstede (1980) defined *individualism* as "a preference for a loosely knit social structure in which individuals take care of themselves and their immediate families only," and *collectivism* as "a tightly knit social organization in which individuals can expect other in-group persons to look after them" (1980, p. 87). Individualism (IDV) is the degree to which individual decision making and actions are

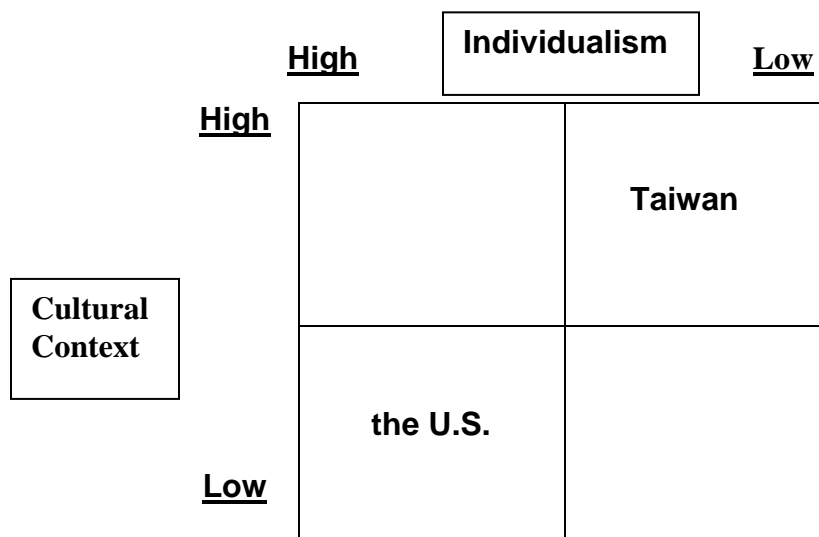
encouraged by society. Hofstede explained that it reflects the way people live together. In a collectivistic society, at the lower end of the individualism-collectivism continuum, individualistic behavior may be seen as selfish.

Of the 39 countries Hofstede analyzed, the U.S. was the most individualistic (IDV dimension) country with a raw score of 91. Taiwan ranked 35th on IDV with a score of 17. Since Taiwan and the U.S. largely differ only with respect to the IDV dimension, there is little need to analyze political advertising from both sides using the other three dimensions--power distance (Taiwan vs. the U.S. -- 18 : 25), uncertainty avoidance (19 : 31), and masculinity ( 27 : 13).

Taking both Hall's and Hofstede's assumptions into consideration, members of a low-context, individualistic culture therefore tend to communicate in a direct fashion and express conflict or dissatisfaction openly, whereas members of high context, collectivistic culture tend to communicate more indirectly. We may further expect that creative strategy in political advertising will likely be different between Taiwan and the U.S. In order to further explore this possibility, the definitions and typologies of creative strategies in advertising are examined next.

By integrating the two cultural dimensions from Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980), we may position Taiwan in the quadrant of high-context and collectivistic culture (i.e., low individualism), while the U.S. is in the other quadrant of low-context and high individualistic culture (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Cultural Dimensions for Taiwanese and Americans**



Note. The original idea of designing this figure as a way to communicate the expected differences in cultural dimensions between Taiwan and the U.S. is from Taylor, Miracle, and Wilson (1997, p. 3). "Collectivism" is assumed to be below the figure.

**Cross-cultural Advertising between Taiwan and the U.S.** In addition to the classic cross-cultural studies by Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980), some comparative advertising research between Taiwan and the U.S has provided some insight into international marketing. The comparative analysis of Zandpour, Chang, and Catalano (1992) is perhaps the earliest study. Understanding cultural differences is often considered a prerequisite for successful international advertising (Keegan, 1989). In view of this, Zandpour, Chang, and Catalano examine the differences and similarities among Taiwanese, American, and French advertising in terms of strategy, content, and execution. A content analysis was performed of 659 television commercials from the three countries. The results clearly demonstrate distinct patterns within advertising messages. Commercials from Taiwan tend to present facts about the availability of the product and special offers without being conceptually integrated. American commercials generally address specific personal needs and consumer problems. They often feature a celebrity or a credible source to provide testimonials or arguments in favor of the product. They keep the brand name before the audience, lecturing in a friendly, conversational tone. French commercials are more likely to be dramatic with minimal copy and seldom address the public with a lecture. Thus, while strong product identification and testimonials are acceptable in the U.S., French and Taiwanese people are more accustomed to subtle and symbolic advertising with very few direct arguments.

In another interesting study, Huang (1993) attempted to examine the use of color in advertising. The purpose of his research was to report a comparison of the color of business-to-business magazine ads in Taiwan and the United States and shed some light on the issue of standardization vs. localization in international advertising. The results indicate that the use of color is affected by culture. Although similarity in color usage in ads could be found between two countries, differences do exist. American ads use more brown and less yellow than Taiwanese ads. The differences in color preference appear to arise from cultural factors: yellow is a favorite color which means loyalty in Chinese culture, while Huang argues that perhaps Americans identify with brown because many Americans have Brown as their surname. The implication is that color usage in advertising may have a cultural boundary.

In a broader scope, Zandpour, Campos, Catalano, and Chang (1994) conducted a study to identify a set of cultural and market-related factors that are likely to shape television advertising messages. Based upon these factors, the study developed a global model that provides specific directions for selecting advertising creative strategies, levels of informativeness and styles that are most likely to fit cultures and market environments in 23 countries around the world. The study further examined cultures, advertising industry environments, and advertising messages from Taiwan, the US, and six other countries, including Mexico, France, the UK, Spain, Germany, and South Korea. The results make clear that advertising in cultures with a nonlinear perception of time provide scattered information without explicit conclusions. They tend to be more symbolic and often take the form of a drama-lecture. Cultures with a linear perception of time, however, are more likely to use a credible source that addresses viewers directly and provides reasoned arguments along with visual information. In addition, markets with higher advertising expenditures per capita are more likely to use dramatic psychological appeals, relying on aural information.

As in the proposed research, Albers-Miller and Gelb (1996) also rely on Hofstede's (1980) four cultural dimensions (individualism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance and masculinity) as a tool for analyzing cultures and using advertising appeals to examine whether systematic differences in advertising content mirror predictable differences in the cultures

themselves. After coding advertisements in business publications from 11 countries (including Taiwan and the U.S.) for the appeals employed, the correlation coefficients relating the proportional use of each appeal and Hofstede's cultural dimensions were computed. The culture-reflecting quality of advertising supported 10 of 30 hypothesized relationships, as well as an additional eight after removal of outliers from the data. The conclusion was that appeals in advertisements and cultural values often relate in nonrandom ways.

Because marketers are increasingly advocating the practice of incorporating culturally relevant aspects in advertising, Leach and Liu's (1998) research is aimed at the use of culturally relevant stimuli in international advertising. The purpose of their study was to explore how cultural aspects are interpreted by the intended audience, or if their impact is universal for all members of the target culture. An empirical example, using norms pertaining to group affiliation, was conducted to investigate the use of cultural norms in advertising within the two divergent cultural settings: Taiwan and the U.S. The findings suggest that when a norm is incorporated in an advertisement, members whose self-concept is congruent with the norms of the culture will use normative rules to evaluate an advertised brand. Conversely, among members whose self-concept is deviant from their culture, advertisements incorporating norms will stimulate cognitive elaboration.

Generally, then, it seems that cultural differences are manifested in the advertising practices of Taiwan and the U.S. The studies cited suggest clearly that culture does play a role in determining different advertising content. Therefore, we might reasonably anticipate that the creative strategy underlying political advertising within the collective culture of Taiwan and the individualist culture of the U.S will be divergent.

**Negative Advertising.** American election campaigns are often characterized as aggressive and highly negative (Diamond & Bates, 1992; Kaid & Johnson, 1991; Tak, 1993; Tinkham & Weaver-Lariscy, 1995). Even though some see negative ads as unethical, others consider them favorably as "radical moves." Nonetheless, negative ads are a creative campaign technique (Diamond & Bates, 1992).

Although critics and voters alike have lamented the rise of negative political campaigning, as Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) point out, it is not a new American political phenomenon, but, rather, an "American tradition." As a rising democratic country, Taiwan also follows the steps of the United States. Cheng (1993) uses "go negative" to describe the worsening problem in Taiwan's election campaigns.

In fact, in 1952, the first presidential campaign to use television, negative ads were aired for the Eisenhower-Stevenson race (Kaid & Johnston, 1991). In that election, Estes Kefauver used the first direct attack television ad against Eisenhower. Several commercials from the "Eisenhower Answers America" series overtly attacked Democrats, although Stevenson was not usually mentioned by name. Since that time, no aspect of political campaigning has received as much attention and concern as negative political advertising, especially that which appears on television. Every presidential election year has had its share of negative televised ads. Thus, it is no wonder that some political observers contend that negative political advertising is the "hallmark" of American media politics in the late 20th century.

Negative political commercials are defining what constitutes a negative political advertisement. In spite of the heightened visibility of negative advertising in the popular media, classification according to types remains preliminary (Tinkham & Weaver-Lariscy, 1993; 1995). Recently, several scholars have suggested that there may be different types of negative ads. For

instance, Merritt (1984) provides a useful framework for classifying advertising messages that compare candidates from those that are purely negative. Both types name or identify the opponent, but the former focuses on comparing “for the purpose of claiming superiority,” while the latter aims at attacking “for the purpose of imputing inferiority.” Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) also argue that there are three modes: direct attack, direct comparison, and implied comparison. Furthermore, they indicate that each of these modes may be divided with respect to a true/false and an ethical/unethical dimension.

Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy (1993; 1995) further extend the analysis of political spot content into a two-dimension-and-four-cell typology: (1) extensive emphasis on self is the positive strategy; (2) extensive emphasis on the opponent is the negative strategy; (3) extensive emphasis on the issue or other content to the exclusion of information about self or opponent is the nonpersonal strategy; and (4) moderate to high emphasis on both personal qualities and opponent’s characteristics is the comparative strategy.

### Methodology

**Population.** The population of interest is all nationally televised political ads broadcasting during the official campaign of the 1996, 2000, and 2004 presidential elections in both Taiwan and the U.S. The Taiwanese population consisted of 242 ads. The TV spots were obtained mainly from the personal collection of the researcher. A complete set of American spots consisted of 354 ads. They were acquired from the Political Commercial Archive in the Political Communication Center (Department of Communication, University of Oklahoma) and the collection of the Political Communication Lab (the Department of Communication at Stanford University).

**Category Construction.** The coding instrument includes three categories for assessing the creative strategy implicit in both aspects of the “message content” and the “message execution.” They are: (1) negative appeals, (2) negativity by type, and (3) negative production techniques.

**Intercoder Reliability.** Two bilingual Taiwanese, both fluent in Chinese and English and familiar with the political contexts in both Taiwan and the U.S., were retained for coding purposes. One coder is a graduate student in business. The other, a naturalized American citizen, works for a Detroit area newspaper. The researcher himself served as the third coder.

To determine intercoder reliability, simple percentages of agreements were calculated for paired comparisons among the several coders (Holsti, 1969). The pilot study data generated an average reliability of .93 across all categories for the Taiwanese sample, with scores for individual categories ranging between .87 and 1.00. In the American sample the average was .88, with coefficients for individual categories ranging between .85 and 1.00.

### Hypotheses Testing and Result

This study uses cultural dimensions to account for possible differences in political advertising between two diverse cultures and the following comparisons were formulated and tested as research hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 1:** Taiwanese candidates will use fewer negative appeals than will their American counterparts. As is shown in Table 1, 65 percent of American spots rely on

conducting negative appeals. On the other hand, only 37.2 percent of the total Taiwanese spots are classified under this category.

Table 1: Negative Appeals

	Taiwanese (%) (N=252)	American (%) (N=354)
Present	90 (37.2%)	230 (65.0%)
Absent	152 (62.8%)	124 (35.0%)

$$\chi^2 = 44.62 (df = 1); p < .001$$

As expected, the finding reported in Table 1 indicates that American candidates are much more liberal than their Taiwanese counterparts in the use of negative appeals which focus on attacking the competitor “for the purpose of imputing inferiority,” or comparing themselves with the competitor “for the purpose of claiming superiority.” It is evident in the literature that American election campaigns are probably the most negative in the world.

Unsurprisingly, the finding here reveals that American candidates use more negative appeals than appear in Taiwanese election. This finding suggests that the cultural assumptions of Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980) are a good index to predict the use of negativity in different cultural settings. It is clear that Americans tend to express their conflicts and dissatisfactions openly, while Taiwanese prefer to keep them under control for group harmony.

**Hypothesis 2:** When using negative appeals, Taiwanese candidates will display an implicit approach with a greater frequency than their American counterparts. As shown in Table 2, the analysis of the data exploring the relationship between the usage of negativity and different cultural orientations indicates that a higher percentage (23.3%) of Taiwanese use implicit negativity in spots than do Americans (1.7%).

Table 2: Negative Appeals by Type

	Taiwanese (%) (N=90)	American (%) (N=230)
Explicit	69 (76.7%)	226 (98.3%)
Implicit	21 (23.3%)	4 (1.7%)

$$\chi^2 = 41.88 (df = 1); p < .001$$

The difference in Table 2, as expected, shows Taiwanese candidates are more generous in using implicit negativity than their counterparts. Implicit negativity includes indirect attacking or comparing with the opponent by offering cues of association to voters without referring to his/her name or picture. On the other hand, American candidates (98.3%) are more liberal than Taiwanese (76.7%) in using explicit negativity, which includes direct attacking or comparing with the opponent by referring to his/her name or picture.



This finding is once again consistent with Hall's (1976) and Hofstede's (1980) cultural assumptions that Americans prefer to communicate more directly and to express confrontation explicitly for personal initiative. Taiwanese prefer to communicate indirectly and to express confrontation implicitly for group harmony because "what is not being said can carry more meanings than what is said" (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 1990, p. 134).

**Hypothesis 3:** In creative execution, Taiwanese candidates will utilize fewer negative production techniques than will American candidates. A significant difference was noted between Taiwanese and American presidential candidates with respect to usage of negative production techniques. A much higher percentage (57.4%) of American candidates use negative production techniques in their negative ads than Taiwanese (6.7%) do. The data are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Negative Production Techniques

	Taiwanese (%) (N=37)	American (%) (N=42)
Use	6 (6.7%)	132 (57.4%)
Does Not Apply	84 (93.3%)	98 (42.6%)

$$\chi^2 = 67.86 (df = 1); p < .001$$

The difference here, as expected, reveals that Taiwanese candidates are more conservative, that is, less likely to use negative production techniques than are Americans. Negative production techniques include misleading by distorting an opponent's original audio/video messages or images to make him/her look more sinister, ridiculous, and negative. Again, this finding confirms Hall's (1976) and Hofstede's (1980) assumptions of culture are valid determinants toward the usage of negative production techniques in different cultural settings. The underlying reason is the same as the use of negativity types in Hypothesis 2.

### Conclusions and Suggestions

As most previous cross-cultural comparison confirms, this research hypothesizes that culture determines advertising content and advertising itself is reflective of culture. The results demonstrate Taiwanese and American presidential hopefuls are "more different than alike" with respect to the use of negative appeals, types of negativity, and negative production techniques. Presumably, this is because cultural traits independently affect the practice of political advertising. The implication is that cultural traits do serve to impact creative strategy differently.

First of all, Taiwanese candidates were expected to use fewer negative appeals in their televised political spots than their American counterparts. The data reveal that to be the case with nearly 2/3 of the American spots relying on negative appeals. Just 1/3 of the Taiwanese spots were so categorized. Generally negative appeals attack the competitor in an effort to establish superiority by imputing inferiority to the other.

Secondly, the degree to which a negative appeal utilized an implicit or explicit approach was also assessed. We hypothesized that when a negative appeal was used the Taiwanese candidates would tend to be more implicit and subtle than are American candidates

who would be explicit and direct. An implicit approach to negative appeals includes indirect attacks or comparisons with the opponent by suggesting undesirable associations without actually referring to the other by name or visual image. An explicit approach includes direct attacks or comparisons with the other, usually by referring to his/her name or image. American candidates used explicit negativity in almost all of their negative televised political spots, while Taiwanese candidates did so in just 3/4 of their negative ads.

The last hypothesis was associated with the creative execution of the political spots. Creative execution concerns the use of negative production techniques such as misleading viewers by distorting an opponent's original audio-visual message or incorporating images to make him/her look more sinister, ridiculous and undesirable. We anticipated that Taiwanese candidates would use negative techniques significantly less frequently than would their American counterparts. And that is what we found, with Americans using negative production techniques in more than half of their negative televised spots. Taiwanese candidates not only used significantly fewer negative appeals (See hypothesis 1), but rarely (less than 7%) used negative production techniques in their negative spots to undermine an opponent. As expected, the finding is consistent with the cultural assumptions guiding this research effort, namely that members of a high-context and collectivistic culture, such as Taiwan, prefer group consensus.

In sum, based upon the data analysis, the results of this preliminary study provide empirical evidence consistent with Hall's (1976) and Hofstede's (1980) conceptualizations regarding cultural patterns in Eastern and Western societies. Consequently, it seems manifest that culture plays an important role in the practice of indigenous political spot advertising, and televised political advertising messages are generally reflective of their cultural orientations.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

As is true of cross-cultural studies, this research has a couple of limitations which impact the interpretation of the results.

First, the generalizability of the findings is limited in that both Taiwanese and American samples only cover the spots of the 1996-2004 presidential campaigns. Stated another way, the samples may lack representativeness and the findings may be oversimplified and cannot be applied to all election campaigns in either Taiwan or the U.S. Ideally, representativeness can be achieved by making a larger sample size over larger time span for observing differences or trends which could more clearly be attributed to respective cultural settings. Also, selection of the political advertisements in other elections (e.g., local elections), or in other media (e.g., newspaper), or even combining with campaign messages in other vehicles (e.g., campaign news coverage) would allow for ample presentation of samples. The more comprehensive the samples are, the greater the degree of confidence with respect to the generalizability of the findings.

The second limitation is the use of Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions. Although his scale and findings have been revalidated, his model is based on research begun 30 years ago and developed empirically rather than theoretically. As Albers-Miller and Gelb (1996) point out, the international team that developed Hofstede's research instrument consisted only of Western researchers, and the model may be oriented toward Western thinking. Furthermore, the scales were developed within an organizational setting and expansion to a political advertising context might impact validity concerns. Future researchers should try to find additional models and studies examining other particular cultural dimensions for conducting their comparative studies. In other words, further research is an obvious recommendation,

with more work incorporating models of culture into studies of advertising content. Hofstede provides only one such model, and the use of others would allow for the expansion of his limited research. Research could then include a larger variety or greater types of advertising (e.g., public interest ads).

Third, this research was developed from a traditional perspective. The relationship between culture and communication tends to be largely “unidirectional,” with culture determinant and communication dependent. Other approaches should also be taken into consideration if future research is to better define the relationship between culture and communication in political advertising. Hall (1992) suggests that coordinated management of meaning (CMM) and ethnography of communication are two alternative theoretical perspectives in regard to the fundamental issues of culture, communication, and their nexus. For instance, the CMM perspective argues the relationship between culture and communication is “irony” since both provide some of their most telling insights into the human condition in terms of differences. In contrast, the ethnographic perspective tends to connect culture and communication in a weaker basis since they are two distinct entities in that “not all communication is culture, fully, nor is all culture communication.” Therefore, the relationship between culture and communication can be considered as “the chicken and the egg.” Which came first (could it be simultaneous?) may change the direction of causality between cultural differences and advertising content and affect interpretations of the findings.

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