

## Cross-Cultural Responses to Arguments in High and Low Context Messages

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# Cross-Cultural Responses to Arguments in High and Low Context Messages<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper we try to explore the relationship between argument and the contextuality of messages in different cultures. We use Edward Hall's work on "contexting" to give a framework for integrating argument and culture (e.g., Hall 1977). Hall says that cultures differ in the way that they encode and decode information in messages ranging from the low context to the high context. We focus on how argument functions in messages of contextuality and looks at how people from different cultures respond to arguments in such messages.

In an earlier paper, two of the authors (Hazen & Fourcade, 2007) looked at argument and the contextuality of messages in one culture, the United States. This paper further develops that research in a comparative framework by adding data from Japan (and expanding the size of the American database). The study uses a series of print ads from Japan and the United States that have already been pre-tested for their high and low context nature and for their acceptability in both cultures. Participants from the United States and Japan are asked to provide: (1) the conclusions of the ads and (2) the assumptions and supportive information in the ads. These reactions are used to make inferences about the way arguments are working in different cultures and in messages varying in levels of contextuality.

### 1.1. Contextuality of Messages/Cultures

For Edward Hall, "communication is culture and culture is communication" (1977, p. 1). He says that cultures differ in how much information and meaning they find in the explicit verbal message and how much they find in the context of the messages. Low context messages tend to focus on the explicit verbal messages and are independent from surrounding contextual elements. In contrast, high context messages tend to rely on two kinds of contextual elements:

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- (1) those in physical/external environments (situation, setting, status of people, activities); and  
 (2) those internalized in the person (past experiences, information, and assumptions).

## 1.2. Argument and Culture

A traditional broad view of argument is that it consists of a claim and the reasons for it (Toulmin 1958; Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1979). Furthermore, O’Keefe, (1977) makes a distinction between Argument<sub>1</sub> (reason-giving) and Argument<sub>2</sub> (disagreement). In connection with cultures, arguments exist in any culture as long as people try to convince someone by presenting two things (a “claim” and a “support”) that are linked. But cultures differ in what is accepted as a claim, what is accepted as a support, how they are linked, and what links are accepted as valid. In these senses, advertisements (whether verbal or visual) are a form of argument. When we look at advertisements both in Japan and the US, we can readily see varying degree of message contextuality; some advertisements are highly explicit in verbal messages while some others are very impressionistic without an apparent clue to what is being advertised. These analyses led us to our research on how people from different cultures (the US and Japan) respond to arguments (advertisements) in messages of different contextuality (high/low).

## 2. Methods

American and Japanese college students were shown print ads and responded to a questionnaire.

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were recruited in a large American university in the east and a large Japanese university in the west. The demographic inform of the participants is given in Table 1.

**Table 1. Participants**

	total	culture			gender		age	
		US	Japan	others	male	female	18-22	others
US	42	41	0	1	21	18	45	1
Japan	46	0	43	3	23	23	33	9

## 2.2. Advertisements

The advertisements (reduced gray-scale images in Appendix) were originally from print magazines but we deleted specific product names. We also made comparable Japanese versions from English versions and English versions from Japanese versions. For example, the printer ad was originally in an American magazine and we made a comparable Japanese version. The six ads used for analysis in the current study were from Fourcade (2006) consisting of six print advertisements that had been tested for their high and low contextuality based on a number of dimensions based on Hall's discussions of message contextuality (explicit/implicit, clear/vague, certain/uncertain, aggressive/passive, assertive/reserved, direct/indirect, obvious/subtle, verbal/visual, amount of information, amount of omissions, degree of ambiguity, and relevancy to the product). Two of the four originally US ads and one Japanese ad were found low in contextuality and the other two US ads and one Japanese ad were found high in contextuality (Table 2).

**Table 2. Ratings of Advertisements from Fourcade (2006)**

	Contextuality	Country Origin	Contextuality	Informativeness	Verbal/Visual
				1=high 7=low	1=verbal 7=visual
Printer	Low	US	3.51	3.2	3.16
Potato Chip	Low	US	2.03	3.5	5.45
Cold Medicine	Low	Japan	3.15	1.65	1.41
Sound System	High	US	4.28	5.3	6.13
Credit Card	High	US	4.29	5.05	5.73
Cell Phone	Low	Japan	4.09	5.32	5.14

(from Hazen & Fourcade 2007)

## Questionnaire

The participants were asked to look at each advertisement and go on to the questions and then move on to the next set of ad and questions. Open-ended responses were solicited by the instruction (in English and Japanese): "This ad, like most ads, is trying to get you to buy something. What thoughts, feelings or images do you remember from the ad that would support the conclusion that you should buy the product?" The American participants responded to the ads and questions in English and Japanese participants responded to those in Japanese.

In addition, semantic differentials data were obtained by asking the participants to evaluate the advertisement on the 7 point scale of the categories like good/bad, negative/positive. (The semantic differentials data will be analyzed in another paper.)

## **Coding**

Open-ended data were coded by American and Japanese researchers respectively working on their own language data. First, each response was split into minimum semantic idea units. We followed the following procedures to determine the coding of each unit.

### **Sequence 1:**

- A. Does the utterance unit relate to
  - (1) a specific piece of information in the ad or
  - (2) information that is outside the ad?
- B. If it relates to the ad, then is it:
  - (1) specific reference to something in the ad or
  - (2) some kind inference/conclusion drawn from specific information in the ad?
- C. If it relates to something specific in the ad, then is it
  - (1) verbal or
  - (2) visual?

### **Sequence 2:**

- A. If it relates to something outside the ad, then is it
  - (1) A principle (heuristic) or
  - (2) Further information (cultural knowledge)?
- B. If it is a principle, is it
  - (1) relevant to the ad or
  - (2) not?
- C. If it is further information, is it
  - (1) likely to be know by others in the culture or
  - (2) not?
- D. If it is further information, is it
  - (1) relevant to the ad or
  - (2) not?

This scheme results in the nine categories as in Table 3.

**Table 3. Coding Categories**

1. Exp.Ref.Verb.	specific reference to verbal info in the ad
2. Exp.Ref.Vis.	specific reference to visual info in the ad
3. Exp.Infer.	inference from something in the ad
4. Heur.Relev.	info outside the ad that is principle/heuristic relevant to the ad
5. Heur.Irrelev.	info outside the ad that is principle/heuristic not relevant to the ad
6. Know.Relev.Gen.	info outside the ad that is further info (cultural knowledge) known by others and relevant to the ad
7. Know.Irrelev.Gene.	info outside the ad that is further info (cultural knowledge) known by others and not relevant to the ad
8. Know.Relev.Idio.	info outside the ad that is further info (cultural knowledge) not known by others and relevant to the ad
9. Know.Irrelev.Idio.	info outside the ad that is further info (cultural knowledge) not known by others and not relevant to the ad

Table 4 shows a sample coding of the printer ad in English. Subject #32 gave a response, which was broken down into 4 units for analysis, each of which was coded accordingly.

**Table 4. Sample Coding of the Printer Ad**

Subject	Unit of Analysis	Code	Label
#32	They say that it is easy	1	Exp.Ref.Verb
	prices seem fair,	3	Exp.Infer
	but not sure what prices really are for printers	6	Know.Relev.Gen
	also the print was really small to see	3	Exp.Infer

### 3. Results

We initially analyzed the results of the open-ended responses and semantic differentials separately. This paper only deals with the results of the open-ended data analysis.

#### 1.2. Open-ended responses

We collapsed the non-explicit categories (heuristics and knowledge outside the ad) into one because of the small number of Japanese responses, resulting in the following four-category analysis for each advertisement. We calculated *chi* square to see the effects of culture of the respondents. First, we look at low context ads (Tables 5-7).

The four-category analysis of the printer ad showed a significant difference (Table 5). The difference between the US and Japanese groups was in the contextual comments.

**Table 5. Four-Category Analysis of Printer Ad (Low Context US)**

	Explicit Ver.	Explicit Vis.	Explicit Inf.	Contextual	Total
Americans	24	7	16	7	54
	44.4%	13.0%	29.6%	13.0%	
Japanese	59	6	38	1	104
	56.7%	5.8%	36.5%	1.0%	
Total	83	13	54	8	158
	52.5%	8.2%	34.2%	5.1%	100.0%
				CHI SQ	13.91
				DF	3
				alpha .01	11.34
				p >	0.01

The four-category analysis of the potato chip ad (Table 6) also showed a significant difference. Again the difference was in the contextual categories.

**Table 6. Four-Category Analysis of Potato Chip Ad (Low Context US)**

	Explicit Ver.	Explicit Vis.	Explicit Inf.	Contextual	Total
Americans	6	4	19	16	45
	13.3%	8.9%	42.2%	35.6%	
Japanese	10	15	50	0	75
	13.3%	20.0%	66.7%	0.0%	
Total	16	19	69	16	120
	13.3%	15.8%	57.5%	13.3%	
				CHI SQ	31.79
				DF	3
				alpha .01	11.34
				p >	0.01

There were significant differences in the cold medicine ad (Table 7). The contextual category was clearly a factor again but there was also something to be noted in the explicit

verbal category, which the Japanese made very heavy use of especially in contrast to the Americans.

**Table 7. Four-Category Analysis of Cold Medicine Ad (Low Context Japan)**

	Explicit Ver.	Explicit Vis.	Explicit Inf.	Contextual	Total
Americans	5	7	28	14	54
	9.3%	13.0%	51.9%	25.9%	
Japanese	37	10	40	1	88
	42.0%	11.4%	45.5%	1.1%	
Total	42	17	68	15	142
	29.6%	12.0%	47.9%	10.6%	
				CHI SQ	32.03
				DF	3
				alpha .01	11.34
				p >	0.01

Now we turn to high-context advertisements (Table 8-10). There was a significant difference for the four-category analysis in the sound system ad (Table 8). Again the difference was in the contextual category.

**Table 8. Four-Category Analysis of Sound System Ad (High Context USA)**

	Explicit Ver.	Explicit Vis.	Explicit Inf.	Contextual	Total
Americans	6	4	19	16	45
	13.3%	8.9%	42.2%	35.6%	
Japanese	10	15	50	0	75
	13.3%	20.0%	66.7%	0.0%	
Total	16	19	69	16	120
	13.3%	15.8%	57.5%	13.3%	
				CHI SQ	31.79
				DF	3
				alpha .01	11.34
				p >	0.01

Table 9 for the credit cards ad shows a significant difference for the four-category analysis with the contextual category making the difference.

**Table 9. Four-Category Analysis of Credit Card Ad (High Context USA)**

	Explicit Ver.	Explicit Vis.	Explicit Inf.	Contextual	Total
Americans	3 7.0%	6 14.0%	19 44.2%	15 34.9%	43
Japanese	11 15.1%	12 16.4%	50 68.5%	0 0.0%	73
Total	14 12.1%	18 15.5%	69 59.5%	15 12.9%	116
				CHI SQ	29.72874
				DF	3
				alpha .01	11.34
				p >	0.01

Table 10 (cell phone ad) shows a significant difference for the four-category analysis. The contextual category was clearly a factor again but there was also some difference in the explicit verbal category again. Unlike for the cold medicine ad, the U.S. group made proportionally greater use of this category for the cell phone ad.

**Table 10. Four-Category Analysis of Cell Phone Ad (High Context Japan)**

	Explicit Ver.	Explicit Vis.	Explicit Inf.	Contextual	Total
Americans	7 13.2%	8 15.1%	16 30.2%	22 41.5%	53
Japanese	7 7.2%	35 36.1%	54 55.7%	1 1.0%	97
Total	14 9.3%	43 28.7%	70 46.7%	23 15.3%	150
				CHI SQ	47.03
				DF	3
				alpha .01	11.34
				p >	0.01

These results suggest:

1. The contextual categories make a significant difference for all of the ads.

2. The other category that seems to make a difference is the explicit verbal but it seems to work differently in the two cases.
3. All four of the ads where contextual categories seem to be the only factor are all American ads. The two Japanese ads are where the other factor of explicit verbal comes into play.
4. Although not statistically significant, we suspect that there are some proportionally different uses of responses in the explicit inference category. One group reported more verbal information than the other in some advertisements.

We also conducted an analysis of the effect of high vs. low context ads on category coding as in Table 11.

**Table 11. Open-Ended Responses: Effects of Ad Contextuality Levels**

	Explicit Ver.	Explicit Vis.	Explicit Inf.	Contextual	Total
Low	147	54	199	37	437
	33.6%	12.4%	45.5%	8.5%	
High	44	80	208	54	386
	11.4%	20.7%	53.9%	14.0%	
Total	191	134	407	91	823
	23.2%	16.3%	49.5%	11.1%	
			CHI SQ		61.03812
			DF		3
			alpha .01		11.34
			p >		0.01

These effects of ad contextuality suggest:

1. The effect is highly significant.
2. There is more use of contextual information for the high context ads.
3. There is more use of explicit verbal information for the low context ads.
4. There is more use of explicit visual information for the high context ads.

#### 4. Discussion & Conclusion

If contextuality was to be interpreted as cultural only, then the results should have shown up in the nationality analysis. However, the fact that contextuality seemed to show up in

the message contextuality analysis across cultures, may provide some evidence for the operation of different levels of contextuality in messages no matter the dominant contextuality of the culture.

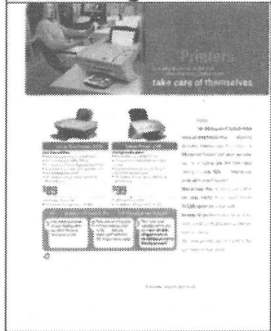
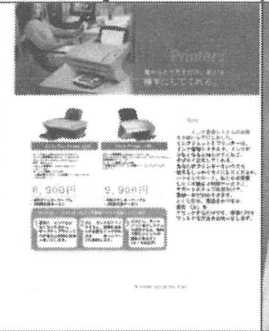


A low context ad may be more or less universally interpreted verbally; both American and Japanese participants recalled more direct information from the ad. Conversely, both American and Japanese activated more contextual information when they responded to high context ads.



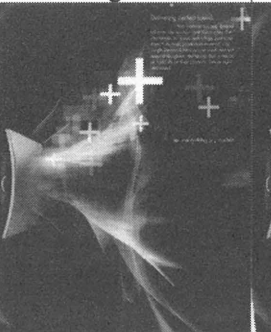

When we say that a culture (e.g., Japan or the US, in a gross simplification) is a high context culture, it may be true that it has more high-context ads and its people are more attracted to high-context ads. But when they are given a low-context ad, they can interpret it in a low-context way. People (at least those college students in industrialized cultures) have potential competence to interpret both high and low context messages but how much they use such and when/where they use such may be different. We are thinking of in terms available communication repertoires (or resources) and their differential uses.

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Appendix. American and Japanese Advertisements (Reduced Gray-Scale Images)

Printer		Potato Chip	
English	Japanese	English	Japanese
			

Cold Medicine		Sound System	
English	Japanese	English	Japanese
			

Credit Card		Cell Phone	
English	Japanese	English	Japanese
