Content analysis: It's applications in advertising research

Akanksha Singh[1], O.P. Singh[2]

[1]*Research Scholar, Faculty of Commerce, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi*
[2]*Professor, Faculty of Commerce, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi*

Abstract: Content analysis is an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the actual and symbolic content of all forms of recorded communication. Content analysis has always been a well-established methodology in social science researches, however, it's application in marketing research in order to investigate consumer and product presentation in the advert is a recent scenario. Because of its ability to consider the issues of reliability, database size and generalization of sample of large universe, it is highly used to analyse advertisements. The technique of content analysis comprises counting the number of times the preselected words, pictures, themes or symbols appear in the given medium, with modern day applications include categorising and quantifying among the selected units and use the data for interpretation which helps in determining that a relationship surely occurs between the frequency of the occurrence of item of interest in the advert and the response of the audience segment. The paper tries to present a theoretical background of the various applications of content analysis in advertising research with the available literature.

Index term: content analysis, advertisements, cultural research.

INTRODUCTION

Content analysis has always been a well-established methodology in social science researches, however, it's application in marketing research in order to investigate consumer and product presentation in the advert is a recent scenario (Sayre, 1992). It was originally developed to study cultures at a distance, but it has been proved to be suitable for marketing applications such as defining the target market and market segments on the basis of information content of their attitudes, personality traits and motivations (wheeler 1988). Basically, the technique of content analysis comprises counting the number of times the preselected words, pictures, themes or symbols appear in the given medium, with modern day applications include categorising and quantifying among the selected units and use the data for interpretation (Sayre, 1992; Wheeler 1988), which helps in determining that a relationship surely occurs between the frequency of the occurrence of item of interest in the advert and the response of the audience segment (Sayre, 1992). Content analysis can be used to study printed material like newspapers, magazines, books or virtually any medium with verbal and/or visual content like radio and television programs, recorded meetings, movies, songs (Wheeler 1988). Content analysis is often used as an inference for latent content and phenomena which are not apparent or visible (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Anand, 2013).

The paper tries to present a theoretical background of the various applications of content analysis in advertising research with the available literature.

Definitions of content analysis given by various authors

Author(s)	definition
Krippendorf (1980)	content analysis is 'a research technique for making replicable and valid interferences from data to their context'
Neuendorf (2002)	Content analysis is 'the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics.
Hall & Valentin	Content analysis is an observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the actual and symbolic content of all forms of recorded communication
(Berelson 1952)	Content analysis is a technique for determining the values, themes, role prescriptions, norms of behaviour, and other elements of a culture from the verbal material produced by the people of a culture in the ordinary course of events.

(Ji & McNeal, 2001)	Content analysis has been the method of choice for analysing communication, particularly for studies of advertising
Holsti (1969)	content analysis is any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages
Paisley 1969	Content analysis is a phase of information-processing in which communications content is transformed, through objective and systematic application of categorization rules, into data that can be summarized and compared.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

For the purpose of consumer research, content analysis is defined as a method of analysis of communication messages using a systematic system of counting items within established categories (Sayre, 1992). According to Budd et al. (1967), Content analysis is suitable for observing and analysing the clear communication nature of the selected medias (Sayre, 1992). Content analysis is highly accepted method in the field of social sciences (Chang, 2011). Also, in order to have a clear picture of nature & behaviour of the target market, it is a well-established research procedure in the fields of marketing research, advertising, (e.g., Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996; Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Chang, 2011; Singh and Matsuo 2002; Ji & McNeal, 2001) consumer behaviour and international marketing (Singh and Matsuo 2002). Because of its ability to consider the issues of reliability, database size and generalization of sample of large universe, it is highly used to analyse advertisements (Wee, 1995). It is an appropriate method for examining advertising messages and the mode of message presentation (Kassarjian, 1977). Content analysis is an appropriate technique to study the cultural value appeals in advertising (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996; Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Tse et al., 1989), as it analyses the values, nature of behaviour & other elements of a culture (Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Mueller, 1987; Tse et al., 1989) through verbal communication (Singh and Matsuo 2002). The method of research allows to collate media content to the real-life scenarios (Wimmer and Dominick, 2000; Morris and Nichols, 2013). Sayre (1992) stated that the application of content analysis in consumer research started not long ago, it is in fact a recent scenario, owing to the difficulties in obtaining the desired information for research by the marketers earlier, it didn't appeal them a lot (Chang, 2011).

Procedure of Content analysis comprises of drawing a sample of communications, preparation of coding scheme for analysis, training of coders to apply the scheme, and evaluation of each sample communication along the coding scheme dimensions (Singh, 2002). Content analysis involves counting the frequencies of keywords and finding the prominent themes in the content for interpretation (Chang, 2011). In order to link frequency with significance, Content analysis is used, also, content analysis combines Numerical data with analyses of quiescent content for utilitarian information on the meaning of texts and how audiences interpret that meaning (Sayre, 1992). Chang, 2011 remarks, a basic but often overlooked difference between content analysis research and survey research is that survey research includes investigator-respondent communication. In contrary, content analysis is most useful in the presence of documentary evidence and its limitations are the limitations of the imagination and creativity of the consumer research (Kassarijan, 1977). As such, this method is best suited for hermeneutic or empirical research as it allows the researcher to spot properties from a large amount of literary information (Chang, 2011). While using content analysis, there is a risk of researcher bias owing to the methods of data collection, interpretation, or analysis, despite that, it has strong merits in the development and testing of theory (Browne, 1998; Kolbe and Burnett, 1991; Odekerken- Schroder, 2001) (Plakoyiannaki, 2008). To overcome this limitation of content analysis, Soni & Vohra 2014 in their research, checked the percentage of intra-coder as well as inter-coder reliability. Okazaki 2007, assessed 106 articles and found out that content analysis is the most popular methodology in the period 1995-2006. This method first became popular in the late 1970s, and during the 1980s and 1990s several researches on cross-cultural advertising employed this (Mueller, 1987, 1992; Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Whitelock and Chung, 1989; Okazaki, 2007). Altheide (1996) also remarks that the applications of content analysis had increased geometrically over the past 20 years, with researches which were lengthy in nature now done in a few weeks (Chang, 2011).

CONTENT ANALYSIS IN ADVERTISING RESEARCH

Advertising is one of a company's primary communication links with its customers and for achieving its commercial goals, advertising is supposed to showcase the content which are relevant to the targeted audience's cultural, economic and societal changes (zhang 2009). As such, advertising can be used to extract valuable information that is aided to understand the characteristics and motivations of the consumers, this is best done with the help of content analysis which provides deep understanding on how to connect the product visually with its consumers and their images to generate advertising that consists relevant values and eternal dreams (Sayre, 1992). Content analysis has, in fact, been widely used in analysing advertising content since 1975 in the United States and it has become a significant research methodology for understanding the portrayal of age, sex roles, wealth, work, food, social status and prestige and other value-laden subjects in advertisements (wheeler 1988). Although it has been criticised for being prone to researcher's bias, it is still the most commonly employed research methodology in cross-cultural advertising research and for identifying advertising themes or appeals across cultures (Okazaki, 2007).

CONTENT ANALYSIS IN CULTURAL RESEARCH

The influence of culture is particularly important in transferring advertising strategy across the borders, because communication patterns and cultural norms in each market are inter-linked (cf. Hong et al., 1987). And thus, the predictability of the advertising differences across various cultures can simplify the task of the advertiser in multiple cultures (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996) making advertising standardized across various cultures. Content analysis was first developed in the social sciences to study cultures at a distance since, it can be aided to determine the beliefs, values, ideologies, role perceptions, behaviour norms and other elements of a culture through systematic analysis of its words and pictures (wheeler 1988). Altheide (1996) says, content analysis is now more used in cultural studies because of the electronic and IT advancements which also contribute to cultural change as web-based content like personal websites, blogs, and other communities influence popular culture and makes it possible to directly study various elements and effects of culture (Chang, 2011). Singh, Zhao & Hu (2005) used content analysis in order to analyse the depiction of cultural values on the local websites of four countries (China, India, Japan, and the US). Findings indicate that local websites of the concerned countries not only reflect cultural values of the country of their origin, but also seem to differ significantly from each other on cultural dimensions.

Song, Ahn, & Sung (2014) adopted content analysis approach to study the reflection of cultural values in financial services advertisements of two countries (USA & Korea). The study involved comparative analysis between magazine advertisements of the two countries. It concluded that, 1. Korean ads showed more collectivistic themes than the US adverts. 2. The Korean ads had more high context cues while the US ads had more low context cues. 3. Korean ads showed more human models and celebrities than US ads. 4. Time oriented cues were more common in US ads than Korean ads.

Moon & Chan (2005) content analysed television advertisements of Hong Kong and Korea in order to find out the differences in advertising appeals of the two countries. The appeals were related to the Hofstede's masculinity/femininity and uncertainty avoidance dimension. The results of the study were quite interesting when they revealed that Korea, a country of high uncertainty avoidance showed more appeals of low uncertainty avoidance and Hong Kong, a country of low uncertainty avoidance showed more values of high uncertainty avoidance. Talking about femininity/masculine dimension, Hong Kong having masculine society showed more masculine appeals while Korea, a feminine country, uses more feminine appeals.

Albers-Miller (1996) content analysed print advertisements of eleven countries in order to find out the cross-cultural differences between the selected countries by using 29 appeals related to the Hofstede's cultural dimension.

Singh & Matsuo (2002) measured the cultural values (based on Hofstede's cultural dimension) on the web by content analysing the web sites of the U.S & Japan. The results showed prominent differences in the depiction of cultural values between the two countries web sites.

CONTENT ANALYSIS IN GENDER ROLE PORTRAYAL IN ADVERTISEMENTS

Content analysis has been extensively used as a major research methodology in evaluating gender roles (Cooper-Chen, 1995), stereotypes and sexism (Allan and Coltrane, 1996; Michell and Taylor, 1990; Royo-Vela, 2007) portrayed in advertising. Content analysis in gender role portrayals in advertisements was first introduced by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971), which improved the methodology as it also focused on the meanings embedded in verbal texts along with the images (Zhang, 2009). Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) concluded in their study that women in U.S. magazine advertisements were shown as confined to homes, passive, incapable of making crucial decisions, fully dependent upon men, lacking intelligence and credibility, younger, and alluring, self-enhancing, and decorative, these results were continued in similar researches which also studied the role portrayal of women in US magazine and television advertising (McArthur and Resko, 1975; Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Whipple and Courtney, 1985; Gilly, 1988; Bretl and Cantor, 1988; Mazzella et al., 1992; Kramer and Knupfer, 1997; Furnham and Mak, 1999; Furnham et al., 2000) for 30 years or so. Despite, the improvements in showing women as professionals and managers in advertisements since 1950s (Cheng, 1997), women were often portrayed as sexual objects in advertisements (Soley and Kurzbard, 1986; Ferguson et al., 1990; Klassen et al., 1993). While most researchers mainly paid attention to women, another body of content analyses has examined the depiction of men and women together (Wiles and Tjernlund, 1991; Klassen et al., 1993; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994) or male roles exclusively (Wolheter and Lammers, 1980; Skelly and Lundstrom, 1981; Kolbe and Albanese, 1996; An and Kim, 2006).

An (2007) adopted quantitative content analytic approach to study the cross-cultural differences in the portrayal of men and women in Korean and American web advertisements on the basis of Hofstede's masculinity dimension. The authors studied the web sites of companies of both the countries with highest sales volume. The researchers concluded that there were significant differences between Korea & USA in terms of the relationship portrayals of men & women, frequency of portrayal of females as main characters & the non-working role portrayals of women. But no significant differences were found between the two countries regarding use of employment situation and type of working roles. Studies of inappropriate gender stereotypes and advertising effectiveness (Jaffe and Berger 1994) emphasize negative effects on consumers, particularly vulnerable consumers such as children and teens, likely to be harmed by gender stereotyping (Browne 1998; Macklin and Kolbe 1984; Maynard and Taylor 1999; Kassarijan, 1977).

Plakoyiannaki & Zotos (2009) applied an integrative approach to content analysis which combines message-related and audience-centred variables, in order to study the print advertisements in British magazines targeting female, male and general audience. Content analysis has been used by the authors to enumerate the types of female portrayals appearing in the consumer magazine advertisements. The paper had three objectives: first, it intends to provide the frequency of the appearance of women in British women, men, and general audience consumer magazine. Second, it intends to study the female role portrayal across different magazine types in UK. Third, finding the association between female stereotypes and product categories. The findings of the study were; first, the women in British magazines were mainly presented in decorative roles reflecting retro-sexism. Second, the females in women targeted magazines were portrayed in non-traditional roles whereas females in men targeted magazines were portrayed in decorative and traditional roles while in general audience magazines females were portrayed equal to men. Third, hedonic products were likely to be linked with portrayal of women in decorative roles while utilitarian products were linked with portrayal of women in diverse roles.

Napoli (2003) used content analysis to study the ethnic and physical attributes of women in Australian magazine advertisements. The study showed that the females portrayed in Australian magazines targeting young female and children were only of the Caucasian origin with blue eyes & blonde hair. Portrayal of women with fair skin, blue eyes & blonde hair may develop female stereotype.

An & Kim (2007) studied the differences in the gender role portrayals between USA & Korea on the basis of Hofsted's masculinity/femininity dimension by using quantitative content analysis. Web advertisements (web sites of top brands from both the countries) were selected for the study. The research concluded that

there were significant differences between Korea & USA in terms of the relationship portrayals of men & women, frequency of portrayal of females as main characters & the non-working role portrayals of women. But no significant differences were found between the two countries regarding use of employment situation and type of working roles.

Zhang (2009) content analyzed magazine advertisements of three countries (The United States, China and Thailand) to compare the gender role portrayals in advertisements of the three countries. The research concluded that American advertisements show more egalitarian ideas than Chinese and Thai advertisements. Thai advertisements show more discrimination against women than Chinese and American advertisements. Similar study was conducted by wiles & wiles (1995) on The Netherlands, Sweden and the USA to study gender role portrayals across the three countries by content analysing magazine advertisements. Also, Royo-Vela (2007) used content analysis to study the gender role portrayals in Spanish magazine advertisements.

Another research by Anand (2013), content analysed recruitment advertisements appearing *Hindustan Times*, to study the prevalence of gender stereotyping in recruitment advertisements across several sectors in India. This study set the base for studying recruitment advertisements in India. According to Anand, scholars have used Content analysis to study the hints of discriminative content in recruitment adverts. Some other researchers have also used content analysis for the same purpose, Kohl and his colleague content analysed 'help wanted' advertisements in US news-papers (Kohl et al., 1990; Kohl and Stephens, 1989; Kohl et al., 1985), McGoldrick and Arrowsmith (1993) studied age discrimination in British newspapers, and Leong et al. (2004) used content analysis to study the recruitments of a Singapore newspaper, and found out that content analysis is a useful method for disclosing the basal objectives of organisations "who profess in a different environment of their commitment to not discriminate" (p.119)(Anand 2013).

A paper by Odekerken-Schroder (2002) used interpretative content analysis to study whether gender stereotyping is more prevalent in masculine or feminine countries. In interpretative content analysis, the researcher goes beyond quantifying the most denotative elements in a message.

CONTENT ANALYSIS IN INFORMATIONAL CONTENT OF ADVERTISEMENTS

Resnik & Stern (1977) content analysed television advertisements in order to find out the informativeness of the advertisements. Fourteen informative cues were selected for analysis and for an advertisement to be considered informative, it had to show any one of the fourteen cues. The advertisements were collected from three networks namely, ABC, CBS & NBC. Out of 378 advertisements, less than half of them were considered informative. The commercials appearing on weekday mornings and weekend evenings were most informative. Category wise, the advertisements with maximum informative cues belonged to the institutional, toy, hobby, transportation, and "other" advertisements category. The authors showed concerns from the results of the study, if today's consumers who are more educated, sophisticated and more aware can be persuaded by such non-informative advertisements. Where they are seeking relevant product information and promising products, such non-informativeness of the adverts can lead self destruction.

Chan K. (1995) also used content analysis to study the informativeness of television advertisements in China based on Resnik & stern (1977) information cues.

Kansal (2013) adopted content analysis to study informative and attractive cues used in OTC Drugs advertisements in magazines of India and the U.S. this also adopted Resnik & stern (1977) classification to study the informativeness of the adverts and to study the attractive appeals used in the adverts Pollay (1986) classification was used. The research articulated that, US OTC drug advertisements had more informative cues than Indian advertisements. OTC advertisements in India mostly focused on attractiveness which hinder ethics and social responsibility.

CONTENT ANALYSIS IN STUDYING THE ADVERTISING APPEALS

An advertising appeal is defined as any message in advertising designed to motivate consumer behaviour (Mueller, 1987). Advertising appeals are content related to the interest, goals, personality, & behaviour of the consumers that are used to attract and persuade the customers for buying the brand (Moon and Chan, 2005, Yu, 2008). Content analysis has been

extensively used to study the advertising appeals of one country and sometimes more than one country for making comparisons between them.

Srivastava (2017) attempted to study the emotional appeals and nostalgic elements in Indian tv advertisements. the researchers downloaded advertisements from the online database of Indian tv advertisements taking over the top five most watched channels and content analyzed for the purpose of the study. The results enunciated that, the positive emotional appeals such as humor were used more frequently in Indian tv ads than the negative appeals such as guilt, regret, sexual appeals, etc. personal nostalgic element was more popular than vicarious nostalgia since, people were able to connect more to the personal nostalgia since they have experienced it on their own.

Soni & Vohra (2014) attempted to study the various themes/appeals used in food advertisements targeting children in India. The authors selected five tv channels targeting children i.e., POGO, Hungama Tv, NICK, Disney & cartoon network. The advertisements forecasting on these channels from 9.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m. for ten weeks were recorded and content analyzed for the purpose. Popular themes/appeals were derived from previous studies. The data was recorded with help of SPSS 19.0. Also, descriptive statistics and chi-square were used through the same software. The researchers found that, opposite to the previous researches, fast foods were the least frequently advertised foods targeted at children. The most frequently used advertising appeals in ads targeting children were similar to the research findings of Warren et al. (2008).

Yu, Paek, & Bae (2008) content analyzed anti-smoking web sites of the two culturally distinct countries, the USA and South Korea to study the differences in advertising appeals made by the two countries. Not much difference was found between the two countries' web sites regarding advertising appeals used in anti-smoking web sites.

CONTENT ANALYSIS IN STUDYING GREEN ADVERTISING CLAIMS IN ADVERTISEMENTS

Prasad (2017) aimed to study the green claims in Indian print newspaper advertisements and provide exhortation regarding environmental advertising on the basis of the experiences of other countries with green advertising. The researchers content analyzed print commercials the times of India newspaper, as according to a survey, the times of India has the highest readership in India. The research concluded that most of the green claims were made in the commercials of consumer durable goods with sights of nature or greenery. The environmental advertising was mostly done on certain events such as World Environment Day. The researchers suggest to have a clear guideline in the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), which is the self-regulatory advertising body in India regarding green advertising.

Leonidou (2011) content analyzed the green advertisements which targeted international audience, over the span of 20 years from 1988-2007. The advertisements were collected from *The Economist* magazine which is a global magazine. The adverts were content analyzed on five major axes: advertiser profile, targeting features, message aspects, copy characteristics, and situation points.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that content analysis is a technique that systematically calculates the frequency of the appearance of a particular item (words, pictures, symbols, sound) in the given medium and interpret the results for articulation. It was first developed in order to study various cultures from a distance, later it expanded its scope to several other fields like marketing. The application of content analysis in marketing research is mostly in studying advertisements of a particular country or several countries at the same time on various parameters. Wee, 1995 remarks, content analysis is highly applied in analyzing advertisements because of its ability to consider the issues of reliability, database size and generalization of sample of large universe.

This paper discusses the various applications of content analysis in advertising research. Among them, content analysis is most widely used in analysing the cultural content of advertisements since, content analysis is appropriate for studying the values, nature, behaviour and other aspects of a culture. Cultural values in advertisements have been studied across various geographical regions in order to find the commonalities between different cultures so that advertisements & sales promotion across borders can be standardized by the global brands. This is done

because designing a different advertisement across different cultures with localized approach incurs a lot of cost and time, which gets easier with standardized advertisements. Most of the studies on cultural values have been done using Hofstede's cultural dimensions which included masculinity/ femininity, individualism /collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance as it provides all the elements which precisely define any culture. Another huge scope of content analysis is that in the study of gender role portrayals, stereotyping and sexism in advertisements. While most researchers mainly paid attention to women, another body of content analyses has examined the depiction of men and women together (Wiles and Tjernlund, 1991; Klassen et al., 1993; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994) or male roles exclusively (Wolheter and Lammers, 1980; Skelly and Lundstrom, 1981; Kolbe and Albanese, 1996) (An and Kim 2006). Content analysis in the study of gender role portrayal in advertisements was introduced by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971). Since then, several studies have been conducted in this regard. Most of these studies indicated that genders are often stereotyped in advertisements of most of the countries and the diverse roles of genders (especially women) is often overlooked by the adverts. A lot of studies on gender stereotyping in advertisements using content analysis have been conducted on the basis of Hofstede's masculinity/femininity dimension also. Content analysis has also been used to study the informativeness of the adverts which implies what and how many informational cues related to the product being advertised are provided in the advert. Most of the content analytic studies on informational cues have been done using the Resnik & stern (1977) framework of informational cues as this framework provides most of the basic informational cues that an advert can show about the product. In fact, Resnik and Stern classification has been used in more than 60 studies to study information cues of advertisements in difference medias, countries and product categories (Abernethy and Franke, 1996). It is important for an advertisement to be informative as the audience's basic need is to know about the product being advertised so that they can decide to buy the product or not, & that's why it is important to study the same. Despite that informativeness of the advertisements have not been extensively studied and there is huge scope of studying it using content analysis in various countries. Content analysis has been widely used to study the different appeals or themes of advertisements in various cultures. Advertising appeals reflect the nature and behaviour of the customer and hence help in convincing the customers to buy the product. To some extent content analytic studies have been conducted to study the green or eco-friendly claims made in advertisements. Although such kind of study is at its nascent stage, it is required to be conducted in this era of sustainable development where the number of green advertisements are increasing. Content analysis has been used to study the advertisements of different medias such as print, television and web. Print advertisements being the oldest has been the most content analysed media as it is easier to content analyse them in comparison to television adverts because of the presence of more words and less pictures. However, with the development of technology, web advertisements have come into vogue and are now influencing more people than print and television advertisements do. Despite its popularity, content analysis of web advertisements is still at its infancy stage especially in India and need more exposure.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study presents theoretical background of the various applications of content analysis in advertising research. It can also be done using systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis with the help of several software. Moreover, the researchers can conduct content analysis to study advertisements on various dimensions discussed in this paper.

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