

Culture and Campaign Communication: Toward a Normative Theory

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt toward a normative theory of culture and campaign communication, which (1) explicates the functional interdependence between culture and campaign communication; (2) analyzes the relationship between culture and campaign communication within the framework of collectivist and individualist cultures (Triandis, 1988, 1995); and (3) discusses the implications of a normative approach toward culture and campaign communication. Explication of the functional interdependence between culture and campaign communication reveals that while cultures influence campaign practices in campaign ideologies, strategies, and implementation procedures, campaigns in turn contribute to changing cultures over time. The differences and similarities of campaign communication in individualist and collectivist cultures are then succinctly stated in ten theoretical propositions.

Introduction

“The basic aim of scientific theory is to provide explanations for observed phenomena.”
Charles Berger (1977. p. 7)

Campaign communication is a pervasive human activity in Asian and North American countries. Cultures in these parts of the world have not only provided contexts for communication campaigns, but also have significantly influenced campaign ideologies, approaches, strategies, procedures as well as measures of campaign effectiveness. While most campaign research in the past aimed at investigating the processes and effects of campaign communication, few studies have focused on the theoretical aspects of running communication campaigns; fewer, still, have made the effort to examine cultural variations of

campaign communication and construct theories that would explain the dynamics between culture and campaign communication. Construction of such theories will, on the one hand, enhance our understanding of the interplay between communication campaigns and cultures and, on the other hand, guide future campaign praxes in various cultures of the world. With its heuristic value and research-generating power, a normative theory of culture and campaign communication will thus advance research in the field of campaign communication in addition to calling for campaign researchers' overdue attention to the importance of culture in operating communication campaigns.

In the process of creating and sharing meanings in human societies, communication campaigns are often launched to mobilize forces for desired social and cultural changes. Campaigns are planned, purposeful events organized to solicit attitudinal and/or behavioral changes in a community of people. The term "campaign" differs from the concept of "social movement" or "mass movement" in that a social/mass movement is often spontaneously enacted by a given number of individuals in a particular society while campaigns are deliberately organized by a sponsoring agent with emphases on soliciting desired changes. Another distinction between social/mass movements and communication campaigns can be made by examining their utilities to each other. Usually, communication campaigns can be employed by social/mass movement organizers for a special purpose at a certain time during a movement, but social or mass movements are seldom started within a communication campaign. Further, although communication campaigns can be grouped into many different categories according to campaigns' idiosyncratic characteristics such as objectives, approaches, and types of participants (see Paisley, 1991 for a detailed discussion), campaign communication refers to the communicative activities commonly shared by all types of campaigns.

Culture, on the other hand, is intimately related to campaign communication since campaigns cannot be run without culture as a context. Culture and campaign communication are inseparable because the occurrence of one phenomenon must necessitate the happening of the other. In other words, without considering a given context for a particular communication campaign, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to understand the success or failure of a campaign. Likewise, without considering culture, campaign communication becomes a senseless occurrence as culture provides the necessary environment within which campaign sponsors create and share meanings with others in their societies. The importance of culture to campaign communication is therefore apparent.

The diversity of world cultures has long been documented by researchers. For instance, Edward T. Hall (1976) believed that the variations of world cultures could be captured on a continuum of high and low contexts. Countries such as China and Japan are high context cultures whereas the United States and Germany are low context. According to Hall (1991), people in high context cultures generally emphasize the context of communication much more than those in low context cultures. Parallel with this line of thinking, while investigating the values held by IBM employees from 53 countries, Geert Hofstede (1984, 1997) grouped the cultural differences he observed into five distinctive cultural dimensions. These are the dimensions of (1) femininity versus masculinity, (2) individualism versus collectivism, (3) power distance, (4) uncertainty avoidance, and (5) long-term versus short-term orientation. Further, Triandis (1988, 1995) argued that across the diverse cultures of the world, collectivism-individualism is the most important dimension of cultural difference in social behaviors as the goals, attitudes, and values of most people's social behaviors in these

cultures are determined by their different orientations to the individual or to the collective. He believed that in extreme collectivist cultures, the individual and the in-group's needs, goals, attitudes, and values are indistinguishable, while in extreme individualist cultures no in-group determines any of the person's behavior. Gudykunst (1998) suggested that, as a major dimension explaining the differences and similarities of people's behaviors in different cultures, the individualism-collectivism continuum offers a powerful explanatory framework to account for and predict human communicative behaviors in these cultures.

Employing the framework of individualist and collectivist dimension of cultures, this paper examines campaign communication practices in a collectivist culture, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and in an individualist culture, the United States. The author first delineates the interdependent relationship between culture and campaign communication, and then proposes a normative theoretical perspective of culture and campaign communication in ten propositions. Implications of such a normative approach toward culture and campaign communication are discussed before conclusions are drawn.

Culture and Communication Campaigns

In more ways than one, cultures function as indispensable social environments for communication campaigns. Considering the running of communication campaigns as human communicative activities, the social environment of campaigns can be conceptualized as having a physical and a psychological component (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Physical environment for a communication campaign includes both the settings and cultural artifacts defined by Triandis and Albert (1987) as the tangible "objective" aspects of a given culture. Psychological environment, on the other hand, encompasses the human aspects of campaign participants who are perceived as the products of their own cultures. Triandis and Albert (1987) termed these intangible elements of a culture as the "subjective culture" which includes norms, roles, beliefs, values and so forth of a group of people.

While cultures provide social settings for conducting campaign communication, campaigns usually function as catalysts for cultural innovations and changes. In the field of communication campaigns, researchers recognize this fundamental function of campaigns as the capacity of campaigns in bringing forth "social changes" or "social improvements" (Salmon, 1989, p. 8) to a community of people. Communication campaigns in the United States, for instance, have primarily aimed at bringing changes to the physical and/or the psychological environment within American society. From its earliest public communication campaigns in colonial era to the present day's drug prevention campaigns, almost all U.S. communication campaigns were designed and run to solicit desired social changes and/or improvements. Specifically, the earliest communication campaign documented in American history was run by Reverend Cotton Mather, whose purpose was to promote inoculation during Boston's smallpox epidemic of 1721-22 (Paisley, 1991; Plau & Parrott, 1993). The campaign brought changes to the Boston community in regard to their acceptance of immunization against smallpox. Similarly, Chinese communication campaigns were generally staged to bring forth social and cultural changes to the physical and psychological environments of the Chinese society. From the earliest documented Chinese public communication campaigns launched by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to its present day campaigns for modernization (Wang, 2002), the Chinese have been using communication

campaigns to mobilize their people for purposes of altering their living environments, attitudes, and behaviors.

Thus, the running of communication campaigns inevitably involves the physical and psychological environments of a culture which, in turn, demands campaigns to facilitate its needed changes or improvements. In essence, cultures and communication campaigns are functionally interrelated as campaigns can not be run without having cultures as their physical and psychological contexts while cultures require communication campaigns to help energize and revitalize them. Thus, the functional relationship between cultures and communication campaigns is one of an interdependent nature. A campaign depends on a culture as much as a culture relies on a campaign.

Campaign Communication in Individualist and Collectivist Cultures

The variations between individualist cultures like the United States and collectivist cultures such as China appear to have determined the variations of their campaign praxes. Given the culture's orientation toward the collective, campaign communication in collectivist cultures like China are typically run with slogans claiming for the collective's interests since the individual and the collective's interests in such a society are perceived as inseparable. Because of this perception, the general appeals of communication campaigns in China are usually tailored to suit the Chinese campaign contexts. The Chinese poverty-relief campaign launched in 1986, for example, appealed to the interests of the collective by calling on its participants to "get rich together." According to *Beijing Review*, "China has mobilized its entire society" and the success of the campaign is attributed to the fact that "Chinese people of various ethnic groups have made concerted efforts to successfully implement Deng Xiaoping's great thinking of eventually realizing the common development of the entire nation" (*Beijing Review*, 2000, p. 27). Campaigns in collectivist cultures tend to be more powerful and effective when they appeal to campaign participants' collective interests.

Campaigns in individualist cultures, however, must target more to the interests of the individual as these cultures emphasize the importance of the individual. Almost all communication campaigns run in the United States seem to have appealed to the interests of the individual campaign participant. American campaign slogans typify this emphasis on the individual. An illustrative example of this emphasis is the campaign launched in the mid-1980s whose purpose was to prevent substance abuse among American youth (Atkin, 1991). Instead of emphasizing the interests of the collective, the campaign's slogan, "Be smart. Don't start," aimed entirely at the individual teen targets of the campaign. The individual's benefit was the primary persuasive appeal of the campaign. Thus, the differences in campaign appeals in individualist and collectivist cultures can be summarized as:

Proposition 1: Campaign communication in collectivist cultures is more likely to appeal to the collective interests of the campaign participants.

Proposition 2: Campaign communication in individualist cultures is more likely to appeal to the interests of the individual target of a campaign.

Hofstede (1997) found that in societies with individual orientation, "I" is the center of the universe for members of the communities, whereas in collective societies, "we" tends to be the prevailing claim for all individuals. Triandis (1988) also believed that characteristics

of the ingroup and outgroup help to distinguish the boundaries of individualist and collectivist cultures. The most salient ingroup and outgroup characteristics closely related to campaign communication are: (1) the amount of influence these groups can exert on individuals; (2) the value of group memberships to the individual; (3) the perceived credibility and/or persuasiveness of group representatives; (4) the perceived similarity of group members; and (5) the perceived level of difficulty in being accepted as a group member. Then, for campaigns to be successful in collectivist cultures, the employment of group leadership is more important than the utilization of such group leadership in individualist cultures. Wang (1997), for instance, noticed that campaigns in China are characterized by political undertones of the CCP, which he believed to be attributable to the perceived group leadership of the CCP in the PRC. He also pointed out that in the United States campaigns were often organized by an individual or an individualistic group of sponsors (Wang, 1997). While campaigns in individualist cultures may choose to emphasize the values of a particular campaign to specific individuals, campaigns in collectivist cultures must opt to accentuate on the values of the group(s) to the individuals. Therefore, the differences of campaign approaches in these cultures can be stated as:

Proposition 3: The more individualist the culture, the more likely it is for individuals to be the sponsors of a communication campaign.

Proposition 4: The more collectivist the culture, the more likely the employment of group sponsorship for a communication campaign.

Proposition 5: The more collectivist the culture, the higher the perceived credibility of the group as agents of communication campaigns.

Proposition 6: The more collectivist the culture, the higher the perceived persuasiveness of the group as agents of communication campaigns.

In the PRC, as pointed out by Wang (1997), group pressure has been most often used in communication campaigns. The employment of group pressure appears to be a preferred campaign strategy to motivate individuals to change in collectivist cultures, whereas social marketing (Solomon, 1989) is found to be the most frequently used campaign strategy in individualist cultures such as the United States. In Chinese communication campaigns, “personal examples” and “interpersonal influences” of the campaign agents who were perceived by campaign targets as in-group members were usually utilized via appropriate channels, yet, in American societies, “impersonal and objective” tactics were reported to be the most effectively employed campaign strategies. In terms of campaign implementation and evaluation, Wang (1997) noted that Americans preferred a standard procedure of executing a campaign with the purposes of achieving mostly short-term effects while Chinese usually depended on their past campaign experiences with foci on long-term social and cultural changes. This finding is consistent with Hofstede’s observation that Eastern cultures tend to have a long-term orientation while Western societies generally subscribe to a short-term cultural orientation (Hofstede, 1997). The individualist and collectivist communication campaign experiences can thus be summarized as:

Proposition 7: Group pressure and interpersonal influences are more likely to be used as strategies in communication campaigns operated in collectivist cultures.

Proposition 8: Impersonal and objective methods are more likely to be utilized as strategies in communication campaigns run in individualist cultures.

Proposition 9: Communication campaigns in individualist cultures are more likely to focus on short-term achievable objectives.

Proposition 10: Communication campaigns in collectivist cultures are more likely to aim at achieving long-term social and/or cultural changes.

Communication campaigns are designed and implemented with a divergence of purposes and effects in both individualist and collectivist cultures. The differences of campaign communication in individualist and collectivist cultures appear to center on campaign sponsorship, appeals, strategies, perceived credibility and persuasiveness of campaign agents, and campaign orientation to short- or long-term effects. These different characteristics of campaign communication are better understood in light of the variances that characterize individualist and collectivist cultures, as cultures provide campaigns with not only the contexts, but also the values, norms, and beliefs of campaign participants. The interdependent relationship between culture and campaign communication seems to have predetermined their functional interdependency on each other.

A Normative Perspective of Culture and Campaign Communication

The running of communication campaigns is a common practice in both individualist cultures like the United States and in collectivist cultures such as the PRC. Most of these campaigns are operated with culturally appropriate and effective strategies for purposes of bringing forth desired social/cultural changes. Focusing on the relationship between culture and campaign communication, and from cultures' orientation to individualism and collectivism, the normative perspective of culture and campaign communication proposed in this paper helps to capture the variations of campaign praxes in collectivist and individualist cultures. The proposal of a normative theory of culture and campaign communication brings forward the following implications for the field of communication campaign research.

First, a normative theory accentuates the critical importance of culture in the running of communication campaigns. In the past, campaign research mostly focused on the processes and effects of communication campaigns. The functions of culture as a key variable in campaign communication were basically ignored. It is time for campaign researchers to situate culture in the center of campaign research. Placing culture in its proper position will help researchers gain a better understanding of the variations of communication campaigns worldwide.

Second, by focusing on the relationship between culture and campaign communication, a normative theory of culture and campaign communication enables researchers to further explore the interdependent relationship between cultures and communication campaigns. Although this paper has explored the relationship between culture and campaign communication and has pointed out the interdependent relationship between culture and campaign communication, further research needs to be conducted to deepen our understanding of the functional interdependency of culture and communication campaigns.

Third, in proposing this normative theory of culture and campaign communication, the culture dimension of individualism and collectivism was employed to examine a

communicative activity at the cultural level. Gudykunst (1998) suggested that “Both cultural- and individual-level manifestations of I-C [individualism-collectivism] must be taken into consideration in understanding how I-C influences communication” (p.109). To follow this suggestion, future research in this area may benefit by investigating the influences of cultures’ orientation to individualism and collectivism at the individual-level. Researchers may want to focus on individual campaign participants instead of specific campaigns in individualist and collectivist cultures.

Further, although the culture dimension of individualism and collectivism was utilized as an explanatory theoretical framework for bringing into focus the cross-cultural variances of campaign communication in different cultures, this utilization does not imply a dichotomization of the dimension. Rather, the dimension is treated as a continuum, and the two cultures selected for the purpose of this paper are representatives on each end of the individualism-collectivism continuum of world cultures. What this usage does suggest though is that more research should be done on campaign communication in other collectivist and individualist cultures to better inform us of the interplay between culture and campaign communication. Moreover, the field of culture and campaign research will further benefit from future research looking into similar issues in cultures that are not predominantly oriented to individualism and collectivism.

Conclusion

This paper employs the cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism to examine campaign communication in a collectivist culture, the People’s Republic of China, and in an individualist culture, the United States. A normative theory of culture and campaign communication consisting of ten testable propositions is then proposed. From this normative perspective of culture and campaign communication, the critical importance of culture in the operation of communication campaigns has thus been highlighted. It is hopeful that this normative perspective will encourage both campaign researchers and campaign practitioners to value culture as an essential element in the running of communication campaigns.

Like the inseparability of culture and communication, culture and campaign communication are intimately related to each other. The relationship between culture and communication campaigns is an interdependent one as culture provides a campaign with its physical and psychological environment and a campaign helps to bring necessary and/or desired changes to a culture. As world cultures vary, campaign praxes in human societies certainly differ. A normative theory of culture and campaign communication however helps to bring the divergence of campaign practices into focus. A better understanding of the variations of cultures will make it possible for researchers as well as campaign practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and effectiveness of communication campaigns operated in diverse cultures. Finally, to validate the proposed normative theory of culture and campaign communication, it is desirable for future research in this area to test empirically the ten propositions included.

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