

Analyzing Cultures through Outdoor Advertising: A Comparison of Billboards in Cuba and the USA

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Abstract: This study is a comparative analysis of outdoor advertising's manifestation of cultural values from two countries, Cuba and the U.S.A. Since Cuba's 1959 revolution, the government has controlled all advertising, including billboards. Today, the once firmly communist country has started taking quiet steps toward a market economy. Drawing on Hofstede's dimensions, this content analysis employs advertising images from Cuba and from the U.S.A. In our analysis, we position Cuba on Hofstede's cultural dimensions and also discuss possible trajectories of Cuba's advertising as it undergoes economic change.

Keywords: Culture, Hofstede's dimensions, Cuba, billboards, public advertising, U.S.A., content analysis

1. Cuba in US News

United States and Cuba relations have been difficult for the past 60 years to say the least. Recently, Cuba has been featured in the news due to changes in the political relationship with the United States. After years of stubbornness, the United States government is taking steps to lift the embargo surrounding Cuban trade (Boyer, 2016). Due to this change the demand for tourism to Cuba from US citizens has grown tremendously (Feinberg, 2016). As people begin to desire Cuba's beautiful beaches and rich history, commercial tourism lines scramble to meet demand and take advantage of this exciting opportunity. A notable recent visitor to Cuba was US President Barack Obama. In fact, President Obama became the first US sitting president to set foot on its tropical soil in almost 90 years. Previously, the last US President to visit was Calvin Coolidge in 1928 (Feinberg, 2016). Obama's historic visit symbolized a thawing in relations between Cuba and its neighbor to the north.

2. Recent Changes in Cuba-US Relations

It has been almost 60 years since the Cuban Revolution, a monumental moment in Cuban history, but also a turning point in Cuba-US relations. In 2015, the United States reopened its US embassy in Cuba, restoring diplomatic relations. US citizens are now allowed to visit the communist state, but under certain restrictions. US citizens must now register their visit by applying for a travel license with the US government. Those applying for the license must

be traveling for one of the 12 authorized reason to visit, some of which include family visits; professional business; journalism; and educational or religious activities.

As Cuba's overtly capitalist neighbor to the north, the US once exerted an imperialistic arm to control or influence the island. However, with the 1959 Cuban revolution, the US imperialistic arm was violently rebuked, thus, beginning a cold period in Cuban US relations. Shortly after Cuba claimed its independence from US imperialism, it aligned with another world power, the Soviet Union. Cuba became increasingly dependent on the Soviet economy and assistance. Additionally, the US-sanctioned embargo on Cuba increased Cuban reliance on the Soviet trade agreement, whereas during its previous booming economic development, it had garnered the reputation as the "Miami of Latin America." Currently, as money flows into the Cuban economy, Cuba is encountering several problematic changes. The communist country now faces a growing class system where comrades turn against each other to secure well-paying jobs in the tourism and entertainment industry.

Taking advantage of the recent diplomatic development, the University of Louisville traveled to Cuba in March 2016 as a hands-on supplement to classroom learning. As part of an interdisciplinary learning initiative, the first three authors of this article, toured Havana and Las Terrazas, Cuba. During the visit, we photographed Cuban billboards and public service announcements for the research project described in this paper. As researchers, we hope to identify the cultural values/dimensions evident in the outdoor advertising of both Cuba and the United States and in the process extend Hofstede's work to an analysis of Cuban culture.

3. Literature Overview

3.1. Culture

Culture is a complex phenomenon. It shapes and develops a person's identity.. Culture has been defined in many ways. Hofstede provides a succinct definition of the concept: "Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 2011, p. 1). Michael Baffoe defines culture as "a social system that represents an accumulation of beliefs, attitudes, habits, values, and practices that serve as a filter through which a group of people view and respond to the world in which they live" (Baffoe, 2012, p. 492). Through these shared, collective values, practices, and beliefs, culture exists at many levels in a society. Because culture represents a unique phenomenon, often derived from unique contexts and settings, the beliefs, values and practices of a culture cannot be replicated.

Many scholars from different disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology, have applied their own categorization of cultural orientations and the concepts recognized within the phenomenon to a global sample. Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils (1951) studied human behavior by categorizing actions into five unique patterns. Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck (1961) comparatively analyzed the similarities and differences in human behavior among five social groups in the southwestern part of the US. Mary Douglas (1973) determined there were two dimensions to a person's defining beliefs and values. Shalom Schwartz (1994) adapted Milton Rokeach's human value orientations to the national level. Additionally, Baffoe

goes on to assert that a “(c)onceptual system (a pattern of beliefs and values that define a way of life) structures the worldview at the level of cultural deep structure that is reflected in surface structures across time and space” (Baffoe, 2012, p. 493). One example of surface structures, which reflect a deep cultural structure, is the advertising of a country. This study investigates how billboards in the capitalist advertising industry of the US and billboards in the socialist government controlled communication ministry of Cuba both reflect a deep cultural structure.

3.2. Advertising

Pervasive as well as persuasive, advertising in the 20th and 21st centuries has become a formative influence on a culture. In the most positive light, advertising has been declared a great tool for increasing economic growth and building support for a more modern and industrialized community. However, many have concerns about the explicit and implicit intentions of advertising. In fact, advertising has been criticized as a manipulative tool constructing false realities with harmful, superficial values in order to increase consumerism (Holbrook, 1987). Some have argued that advertising is a burden on societal development because of its trivialization of harmful behavior, augmentation of class and gender stereotypes, and promotion of wasteful consumption (e.g., Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004).

Pollay (1986) proposes advertising is a distorted mirror. It selectively reflects cultural values and social norms that best benefit the industry, thus sustaining the Marxist production/consumption circulation. However, Holbrook (1987) and Pollay (1987) both reference that advertisements must represent favorable cultural values in order for the advertisement to be successful and accepted publicly. Pollay states, “These crafted communications display, celebrate, and endorse the products and related values, attitudes, and behaviors and all aspects are made commonplace and legitimated by virtue of being public without protest” (1987, p.108).

3.3. Cross-cultural Advertising

Advertising has been determined to be a sound method for cross-cultural comparative analysis. Cross-cultural analysis of advertising can identify specific differences and similarities in advertising strategies, expressions, and manifest cultural values, norms, and stereotypes of the target audience and the larger culture. Advertising often manifests a country's consumption values through reflection of social and cultural characteristics. Researchers have argued advertising does not however represent the reality of society, but instead prescribes the appropriate social norms and values within the culture. These prescribed values, however, must reflect the cultural values and social norms in order to attract the target audience. Therefore, advertisements depict a closely accurate manifestation of the commonly accepted cultural values and social norms.

Tse, Zhou, and Belk (1989) found outside influence has a great impact on how cultural values are communicated to societies. When comparing three contiguous countries, they found value convergence in countries wanting to emulate their surrounding counterpart's economic success. Additionally, Tse, Zhou, and Belk (1989) argued economic development, political

ideology, and business training and philosophy shape a culture's consumption values. In other words, these three factors contribute to the composition of public advertisements. Pollay (1987) argues advertising in fact mirrors a country's cultural characteristics. If advertising manifests a country's cultural dimensions, then it reflects the country's economic development such as industrialization. Advertisements indicate economic development by conveying a market segmentation in their audience. Mueller (1987) additionally argues the presence of advertising reflects the direction a culture is moving towards.

Furthermore, Hofstede (2011) states "the most common dimension used for ordering societies is their degree of economic evolution or modernity" (p. 3) The research of Tse, Zhou, and Belk (1989) concludes that developing countries are beginning to adopt hedonistic values often found in the industrialized countries in the West. Triandis (1995) has indicated that as cultures become more industrialized they evolve from collectivistic to individualistic. This transition is visible through public advertisements (Cutler, 1992).

Advertising is inherently individualistic. Pineda et al. (2015) note that individualism is central to the ideology of advertising. They also state individualism and collectivism have been used as thematic concepts in advertising research. Individualistic values appear more frequently in advertisements over collectivistic values since advertisers tend to accentuate individualism in order to drive consumerism (Drew et al., 2005). As international relations increase, cultural values convergence increases. Several studies have found individualistic values creeping into advertising in traditionally collectivistic cultures (Tse, Belk & Zhou, 1989; Pineda et al., 2015).

Cuba has started on the trajectory of industrialization. One piece of evidence for Pollay's argument is the mended relations with the Americas. Since the 2015 Latin American Cities Conference in Panama, Cuba has reestablished economic and political partnerships with every country in Latin America. However, with industrialization comes commercialization and consumerism - ideas that conflict with Cuba's current, longstanding egalitarian ideology. Pollay (1987), argues a positive correlation between a country's industrialization and consumerism. Pollay uses advertising in Japan and the United States to demonstrate his argument.

As Cuba begins to grow the once familiar, but now new relationships with the North, Central and South America, it will have to decide what compromises to make as it enters partnerships with its industrialized allies. Will Cuba become industrialized to meet the ever-growing demand from consumerism in the 21st century? Furthermore, how will these changes affect the nation's culture? To examine the nation's culture as evidenced in the advertising, we utilize Hofstede's work.

3.4. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's studies of cultural variations offer an appropriate approach to our analysis of differences in public advertising across cultures. Hofstede posits that the combination of certain cultural dimensions can allude to a country's value set. If one country has a particular value set, it could be possible to presume a country with the opposite cultural dimensions would have an opposing value set to the other country. Using statistical measures based on theoretical assumptions, Hofstede classified cultures first along four dimensions (1980), then along five (1991), and later along six dimensions (2011). Each dimension describes cultural

expectations and hence provides insights into the communication processes of that culture. The six dimensions are:

Individualism versus Collectivism: The extent to which the people of a culture are interdependent and emphasize their in-group versus focused on themselves and possibly their immediate family. Belgium and the United States are on one end of the continuum while Guatemala and Japan are on the other (Hofstede, 2001). Researchers suggest that individualism-collectivism is the most important characteristic that distinguishes one culture from another (Triandis, 1995).

Power Distance: The extent to which the people of a culture accept the unequal distribution of power in institutions and organizations (Hofstede, 2001). For instance, Denmark and New Zealand, located at the low end of the continuum, consider social or class inequalities ought to be decreased, while Guatemala and the Philippines, located at the high end of the continuum, accept that hierarchy and class inequalities are natural and appropriate.

Uncertainty Avoidance: The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations and attempt to circumvent these circumstances through formal structures and rules (Hofstede, 2001). Ireland, Singapore, and Denmark are located on the low end of the scale while Greece, Portugal, and Uruguay are on the high end, preferring to avoid uncertainty.

Masculinity versus Femininity: The extent to which the people of a culture prefer assertiveness and achievement or caring for others and quality of life. In a Feminine culture, the roles of men and women are fluid while in a Masculine culture the roles of male and female are often distinct and well defined (Hofstede, 1980). Hofstede's scale measures a culture's location along the masculinity—femininity dimension. On one end of the scale are Mexico, Italy and Japan, and at the other Sweden, Thailand, and Portugal (Hofstede, 2001).

Long-term versus Short-term Time Orientation: Long-term oriented cultures are future-oriented, appreciate persistence and thrift while short-term oriented cultures are past and present-oriented, expect quick results following one's action, and appreciate tradition. China is a long-term oriented culture, while the U.S. is short-term oriented (Hofstede, 1991).

Indulgence versus Restraint: Indulgence describes a culture that generally appreciates gratification of human desires related to enjoyment of life. Restraint describes a culture that controls the gratification of desires through rigid social norms (Hofstede, 2011). "Indulgence tends to prevail in South and North America, in Western Europe and in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Restraint prevails in Eastern Europe, in Asia, and in the Muslim world" (Hofstede, 2011, p. 5).

3.5. Why Use Billboards?

Billboards are a sound medium for analysis based on literature stating that although "(b) illboards... remain the most common form of outdoor advertising" (Taylor, Franke & Bang, 2006, p. 21), they are "one of the least researched of any mass medium" (Katz, 2003, p. 92). Billboards possess a powerful visual storytelling element. From their tall stature standing out amongst highways and roadways, billboards provide eye-catching avenues for advertising and public announcements. Since their rise to popularity in the early 20th century, billboard

messages can be viewed from fifty feet or beyond. Because of these characteristics, billboards often exist as the ideal channel for mass dissemination of a message. In addition, billboards inhabit a unique public space, whereas other mediums of advertising do not, such as print ads. Public spaces contribute to the deep cultural structure of a society by shaping and reinforcing a community's identity, values, and relationships. Though billboards are static advertisements by nature, their ability to convey powerful visual messages are evident (Taylor, Franke & Bang, 2006).

While billboards are among the less examined mass media (Katz, 2003), their use is widespread in the United States and common in Cuba. This research utilizes public outdoor advertisements, specifically billboards, to draw conclusions on each country's cultural dimension. In doing so, we pose a two-fold research question: How do billboards in the U.S.A. reflect Hofstede's cultural dimensions in the U.S.A.? How do billboards in Cuba provide approximations of Hofstede's cultural dimensions in Cuba?

4. Methods

4.1. Content Analysis

We used content analysis to examine the cultural dimensions evident in the outdoor advertising of two countries, Cuba and the United States. Content analysis is established as an accepted method of communication and marketing research. The United States was selected because it has been commonly used as an example for individualistic values. Cuba was selected because it has yet to be culturally classified within Hofstede's dimensions. The United States has been comparatively analyzed to several Asian cultures, but to few Hispanic cultures (Pineda, Hernandez-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernandez, 2015). Additionally, Cuba is in a dynamic moment in its history. This research will hopefully lead to chronicling Cuba's economic and political future. A study at this time provides an initial baseline for future longitudinal studies of how advertising in Cuba changes in its content and functions.

4.2. Sample

For the purpose of this study, billboards, also referred to as outdoor advertising, are defined as freestanding structures. Thus, billboards exclude bus advertisements, posters, etc. Standalone structures were the requirement for inclusion in this study.

Because of the exploratory nature of this study and the goal to achieve an inexpensive approximation of the true cultural values conveyed in outdoor advertising, the researchers employed a convenience sample within a 15-mile radius of the waterfront of both cities, as well as along major roads and highways. A total sample size of 136 billboards was collected from both countries. In several cases more than one billboard of the same content was collected, and when duplicate billboards were identified the second billboard was not counted. After eliminating equivocal and repetitive cases, the researchers coded 115 remaining cases: 28 photos of outdoor advertising in Havana, Cuba and 87 of outdoor advertising in Louisville, Kentucky. The analysis software QDA Miner was utilized to conduct the study.

4.3. Analysis

The content analysis was performed by two researchers. In addition, a reliability check was performed on at least 20 percent of the sample. The reliability check indicated interrater agreement with a Cronbach's Alpha of 76 percent with discussion resolving all points of disagreement.

While at first glance, Hofstede's dimensions seem inherently dichotomous, however, as Hofstede states, the country's dimension is actually an index in a cultural spectrum meaning the countries are ranked in relation to other countries in the data set. Hofstede found each country's score is relative to the other countries in the data set. The dimensions are not absolute and cannot stand by themselves. Hofstede continues to argue the dimensional paradigm is only applicable at the national level and cannot stand independently.

We found this to be true in our research. Because Hofstede's dimensions are not mutually exclusive cultural orientations unlike other models based on dimensional paradigms, we found some cases could represent both dimensions. For these instances we chose the most applicable code or the code with the most representation in the advertisement. Also, if a dimension wasn't present, we did not code for that dimensions. For example, advertisements featuring aspect of short-term orientation received the short-term orientation code only and not a code for the absence of long-term orientation. A country's dimension index shows where that country falls on the dimensional spectrum.

Because of the visual nature of outdoor advertising, we excluded the cultural dimension Power Distance Index from this study. Our codebook, which was grounded upon Hofstede's cultural dimensions, defined individualist billboards through the keywords: *independent*, *personal*, and *I*, whereas collectivist billboards were defined through *relationships*, *cooperation*, and *in-group*. Short-term oriented billboards were defined in the codebook through the keywords *fast results* and *traditional*, but long-term oriented billboards were categorized through the keywords *thrifty*, *save*, and *invest*. While masculinity was defined with the terms *competition* and *assertiveness*, femininity was defined through the terms *caring* and *quality of life*. In the same way, high-uncertainty avoidance was categorized through the terms *expressive* and *high-context*, but low-uncertainty avoidance was categorized through the terms *innovative*, *tolerant*, and *open*. While convenience was categorized through the terms *easy* or *one-stop*, indulgence was categorized through the terms *giveaway*, *win*, *delicious*.

Code frequency for COUNTRY

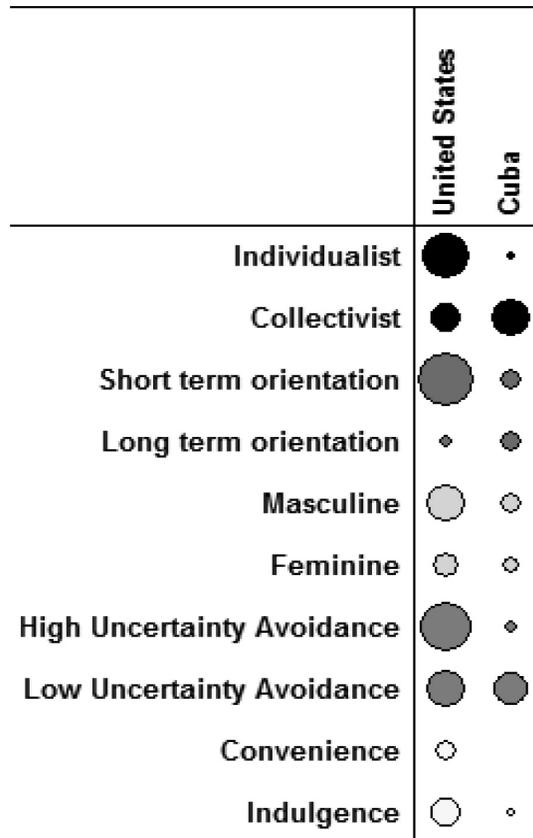


Figure 1. Code Frequency by Country

5. Discussion

The results indicate Cuba’s billboards reflect collectivist values, rather than individualist. Though the results do not convey a difference between short and long-term orientation reflected in Cuban billboards, with 14.4 percent of cases reflecting short-term oriented values and 10.6 percent of cases reflecting long-term oriented values, this small difference suggests Cuba may fall in the center of the spectrum on this cultural dimension.

Of the US sample, 21.4 percent demonstrated short-term oriented values, as opposed to Cuba’s 14.4 percent. Cuba had the highest percentage of long-term oriented values in comparison to the United States.

About 11 percent of Cuban billboards featured long-term values, as opposed to 1.6 percent of US billboards demonstrating long-term oriented values. The contrast in this dimension reaffirms Hofstede's classification of the US as particularly short-term oriented and our expectations of Cuba as particularly long-term oriented. Figure 1 demonstrates the differences in the two samples. Not surprisingly, the United States had the highest percentage of individualistic ads represented, whereas Cuba had the highest percentage of collectivistic ads. This difference can be explained by Cuba's egalitarian political ideology and socialist economy versus the United States' laissez faire, free market. A state controlled economy would focus resources and public advertisements toward essentials and necessary goods instead of commodities and desired goods found in consumerist society, such as the United States. The billboards in the US sample encourage commercialism and consumerism in its capitalist economy. However, 5.7 percent of the ads represented collectivistic values in US advertising. An explanation for the presence of the collectivistic dimension could possibly be the nature of advertising and use of persuasive tactics to invoke a collectivist feeling towards a product, image or message. For example, the US healthcare industry may employ an advertisement with inclusive and collectivist language in order to target or rally support from mass groups of people.

Oddly enough, the US and Cuba advertisements had similar representation of masculine values. It has been found that masculine values dominate Western beliefs. Feminist ideology is found more frequently in European culture (Hofstede, 2011). An additional explanation of this finding could be the close proximity between Cuba and the US. During our stay in Cuba, we encountered US culture from the radio to fliers advertising US popular media. Perhaps masculine values found in US culture have been adopted by Cuban society in order to emulate the achievements typically associated with masculine qualities. Tse, Zhou, and Belk (1989) found countries within close proximity will adopt cultural values presumed to be closely related to success. In the same way, Latin American influences may also be guiding Cuban culture (Tse, et al., 1989). In Western society, masculinity is synonymous with success. In fact, our codebook's definition for masculinity included personal achievement, e.g. success. Perhaps the masculine values of Cuba are reflective of patterns prevalent in Latin America.

Through the comparison of these codes, it is possible to extrapolate the cultural consequences of the economic system and choices of each country. While the United States' firmly capitalist system seems to promote values of individualism and masculinism, Cuba's socialist system seems to privilege the cultural values of collectivism and feminine qualities.

It is important to understand that these cultural dimensions are not mutually exclusive, but rather are indices to rank nations' cultural values. As noted earlier, these cultural dimensions exist on a spectrum where each country falls on a range of cultural dimensions. Figure 2 illustrates how these cultural dimensions exist on a continuum, not as bipolar opposites. It is important to note that these cultural dimensions are tendencies that generalize the overall cultural attitudes of a place, not individual beliefs. Figure 2 generated from QDA Miner illustrates where both Cuba and the United States fall within a spectrum of Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

From our research and comparative analysis to the United States, it seems Cuba is on the path to industrialization and ergo consumerism. The majority of Cuba's billboards illustrate communist values, however there were a handful of advertisements in the Havana airport with consumerist themes.

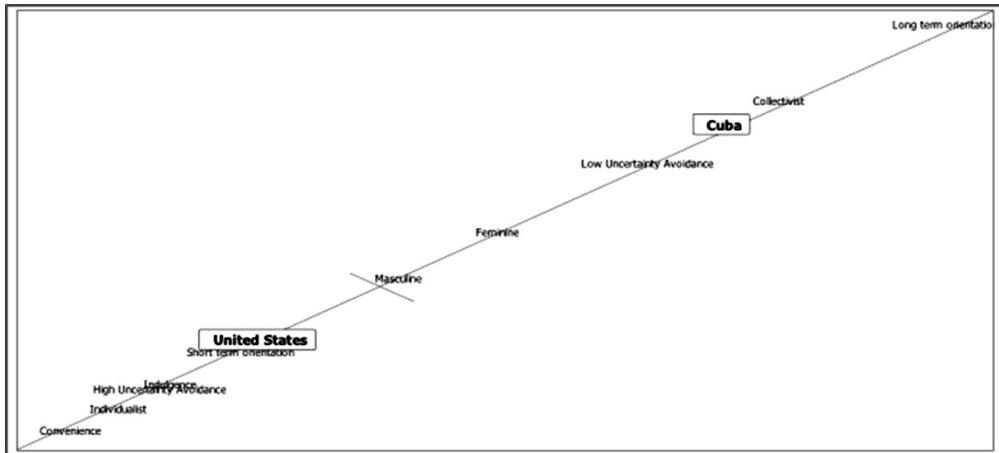


Figure 2. Continuum of Cultural Dimensions

6. Limitations

There are several limitations to consider along with the conclusions of this study. Most notable is the difference in sample size between the two countries. The sample consisted of 28 photos of Cuban billboards and 87 photos of US billboards. This difference is partly due to the route of our guided tour while traveling in Cuba. However, it also illustrates the dominance of advertising in the US. While travelling in Cuba, we travelled on a guided tour, thus our routes might have privileged travelling in certain areas over others. The tour preceded US President Obama's visit to Havana, meaning some routes may have been blocked off to prepare for the historic visit.

Desmarais (2007) notes, "any discourse is stamped with its own culture" (p. 2). In other words, there is no complete way to objectively analyze a culture without one's own cultural influences and biases. In Desmarais' article, he quotes Raymonde Carrol's *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience* stating "in cultural analysis, what I am demanding of myself is a very complex mental exercise: indeed, in order to understand the other through cultural analysis, I must at least temporarily, accept that my truth is precisely that, 'my' truth, that is it not the absolute truth, but a relative truth" (Desmarais, 2007, p. 2). As researchers, we recognize how we could not entirely remove ingrained social and cultural biases or assumptions while coding. While on one hand "...we can speak as insiders with tacit knowledge about the sociocultural landscape of the country" (Baffoe, 2012, 494), on the other this insider knowledge of one culture inherently influences one's perceptions and assumptions of another culture.

During coding, we coded the cases as one code or the other. In this context, the codes were distributed dichotomously. A case, for example, either received individualism or collectivism where Hofstede argues that a country's cultural index is fluid. We would recommend future researchers to use this method as part of a cultivating process towards the analysis of a country's cultural dimensions. Through the nature of our study, we fell into the unintended dichotomous

nature of Hofstede's dimensions. Whereas Hofstede used a multi-item survey measuring several levels and sub-levels of national cultures to create and adapt the cultural dimensions, we coded the binary representation of cultural values displayed in public advertising.

7. Future Directions

During the authors' short stay in Cuba, the tour guide commented on the billboards as mostly "revolutionary messages." Future research should investigate how local communities perceive the persuasive messages on billboards. Are the persuasive messages merely noise? Or are the billboards recognized by intended audiences as reflections of cultural values? Future research may also consider the differences in groups of intended audiences: how do Cuban millennials and the Cuban generation of the revolution view the cultural dimensions portrayed on billboards? Qualitative ethnographic research possesses the power to further delve into how billboards reflect a culture's values and how different audiences perceive these values that are reflected on billboards.

In addition, this study focuses on outdoor advertising as the point of analysis; however, the underground marketplace in Cuba provides an interesting project for analysis as well. "El Paquete Semanal" is Cuba's alternative to the internet— a hard copy that is delivered to the front door of Cubans. With the popularity of "El Paquete" soaring in recent years, business have begun to advertise through the underground media (Pedro, 2015). These advertisements represent new steps in Cuba toward an open market. Future research should further investigate how Cuba's small steps toward an open market are shaping the nation's cultural values.

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Author Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies in Shanghai, July 2, 2016. The authors are grateful for travel support, from the University of Louisville, to present the paper, and to the anonymous reviewers and editors for helpful suggestions.

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Appendix 1:

A. Image of a Billboard in Havana, Cuba. Photographed in March 2016.



Yesterday, today (long-term orientation).

B. Image of a Billboard in Havana, Cuba. Photographed in March 2016.



Relationship, camaraderie, nosotros meaning 'us' in English (collectivism).

C. Image of Billboard in U.S. Photographed in April 2016.



Thrill, instant satisfaction (short-term orientation).

D. Image of Billboard in U.S. Photographed in April 2016.



New, luxury (indulgence).

Appendix 2

Code Occurrence per Billboards by Country			Code Frequency by Country		
	United States	Cuba		United States	Cuba
Individualist	75	6	Individualist	16.7%	2.4%
Collectivist	12	22	Collectivist	2.8%	8.6%
Short term orientation	83	10	Short term orientation	19.4%	10.6%
Long term orientation	4	9	Long term orientation	3.9%	11.1%
Masculine	25	8	Masculine	15.6%	12.4%
Feminine	10	6	Feminine	3.9%	10.9%
High uncertainty Avoidance	71	4	High uncertainty Avoidance	16.1%	5%
Low uncertainty avoidance	24	22	Low uncertainty avoidance	8.3%	7.7%
Convenience	9	0	Convenience	16.1%	0
Indulgence	15	3	Indulgence	8.9%	2.1%