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APA Citation

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Cultural differences in message strategies:

A comparison of television advertising in Hong Kong and China

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Submitted to Journal of Asian Pacific Communication
April 22, 1995

This is an earlier version that the author can find. This is not the final manuscript accepted for publication.

Information content of Television Advertising in Hong Kong and China

Abstract

A content analysis of 341 commercials broadcast in Hong Kong and 324 commercials broadcast on national and regional channels in China was conducted. Coding frame on advertising information content and style of advertising was based on The Resnik and Stern (1977) evaluation criteria were adopted to determine the level of advertising information contents in television advertising. It was found that 56% and 58% of the sampled commercials in Hong Kong and China television advertising were classified as informative respectively. The four most frequently occurring information cues in Hong Kong and China television advertising were performance, quality, availability and components/contents. Drug and non-durables commercials were found to be most informative while liquor advertising was least informative in Hong Kong. Non-durables and drug commercials were most informative while cigarette and liquor advertising were least informative in China. Hong Kong commercials contained a higher proportion of information cues on special offer, availability, price and independent research. China commercials contained a higher proportion of cues on performance. Information contents were mainly determined by types of products advertised and was not dependent on characteristics of commercials like duration, broadcast day, time and channel.

**Cultural differences in message strategies:
A comparison of television advertising in Hong Kong and China**

Introduction

Hong Kong Chinese watching television commercials from China will notice that the approach to television advertising is quite different from that generally found in Hong Kong. The current research has drawn attention specifically to differences in the message strategies, including the information content as well as execution style of advertising.

Since the open-door policy was adopted in 1979, China has introduced many aspects of capitalistic economics into its socialist economy. The rapid pace of economic development causes the prosperity of the Chinese population and enhances people's purchasing power. With more money to spend, the retail volume has registered rapid growth and consumers now enjoys a wider choice of products and services. The economic reform also implies a decentralization of trade and decision-making, and a greater reliance on the market forces to guide production. Enterprises now experience the 'responsibility system' in which economic units are responsible for their own profits and losses. As a result, advertising has become one of the fastest growing industries in China in the past decade. Consumers also rely heavily on advertising to know the availability of products and services. Enterprises utilize advertising for promotion of products and services.

According to official statistics, the total business volume of advertising in China was RMB13.4 billion in 1993 (China Advertising, 1994). The average annual growth rate for advertising revenue for the period 1983 to 1993 was as high as 50%. The per capita advertising expenditure was RMB 11 in 1993. The four major advertising media were television, newspaper, broadcast radio and magazine. Television contributed over one third of the total media expenditure and was the second important media in 1993 (China Advertising, 1994). Unlike China, advertising is well-developed in Hong Kong. The advertising expenditure in

Hong Kong in 1993 was nearly 11 billion Hong Kong dollars (SRG, 1993). The per capita advertising expenditure of Hong Kong in 1993 was HK\$1897 and was over 180 times that of China. Hong Kong is also seen as a more westernized and modernized city than its motherland.

The objective of this paper is to compare the message strategies between Hong Kong and China television advertising. The study will investigate the information content and execution style of television advertising in Hong Kong and China. The study aims at exploring what types of information are communicated and how they are presented. The study also targets at explaining the possible differences in terms of the variability of the market situation, the advertising industry environment and the cultural emphasis.

Literature Review

Past research has identified several factors that differentiate advertising messages among countries, including the portrayal of sex roles (Gilly, 1990), advertising creative strategy (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992), information content (Maenaka, Miracle and Chang, 1991), advertising execution (Miracle, Chang and Taylor, 1992) and humor in advertising (Alden, Hoyer and Lee, 1993). These differences in advertising messages have often been assumed to reflect variations among cultures (Tse, Belk and Zhou, 1989) and advertising industry environments (Nevett, 1992).

The current study emphasizes on message differences among Hong Kong and China television advertising in terms of information content and execution styles.

Individualism-Collectivism has been suggested to be one of the major dimensions of cultural variability (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961; Hofstede, 1980). Individualistic cultures emphasize the goals of individuals as compared that value group concerns and needs in collective cultures (Kim and Gudykunst, 1988). The emphasis in a individualistic society is on a person's initiative and achievement (Tomkins, 1984), relying on factual information for decision-making as opposed to seeking group harmony and consensus (Gudykunst, Ting-

Toomey and Stewart, 1985). Zandpour (1994) argued that individualistic cultures would provide their audience with more detailed, factual and quantifiable information that was needed for decision making.

Advertising industry environmental factors like type of advertisers (Miracle, 1968) and level of government regulation (Boddewyn, 1982) have been identified that will influence advertising. For example, it has been suggested that high involvement products will urge the advertisers to provide more factual information as compared with low involvement products (Bowen and Chaffee, 1974). In Stern, Krugman and Resnik's (1981) and Zandpour, Chang and Catalano, 1992) studies, product category was the major factor affecting information content, creative strategy and style of advertising.

Zandpour (1994) argued that availability of commercial breaks during television programs would affect the advertising style. In markets where commercial breaks are not available, each commercial has to compete with a larger pool of commercials and therefore places greater emphasis on entertainment values and less on information. Zandpour (1994) also argued that per capita advertising expenditures represented the level of advertising sophistication and consumer acceptance of advertising as a legitimate promotional channel. Zandpour (1994) suggested that higher levels of advertising sophistication would be demonstrated by the more likely to use psychological appeals and symbolic association in advertising.

The initial study on level of information content in advertising was conducted by Resnik and Stern (1977). An advertisement was defined as informative if it contained one or more of fourteen possible information cues. These cues, such as price and availability, represent categories of potentially useful information to consumers. Resnik and Stern's classification has been widely used in the study of magazine, newspaper and radio advertising in many countries including the United States (Laczniak, 1979; Stern, Krugman and Resnik, 1981; Healy and Kassarijian, 1983; Harmon, Razzouk and Stern, 1983; Chou, Franke and Wilcox; 1987), Australia (Dowling, 1980), Canada (Pollay, Zaichkowsky and Fryer, 1980), the United Kingdom

(Taylor, 1983), Japan (Madden, Caballero and Matsukubo, 1986; Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkhan, 1987), China (Rice and Lu, 1988), India (Khan, Azam and Khan, 1991), South Korea (Keown, Jacob, Schmidt and Ghymn, 1992) and Hong Kong (Chan, 1986). Resnik and Stern's classification system is adopted in this study due to its well established baseline and tested reliability.

Advertising execution style involves the packaging and the organization of messages. Kotler (1984) categorized a commercial into nine categories including slice-of-life, lifestyle, mood and image, testimonial, technical expertise, scientific evidence, musical, fantasy and personality symbol.

Method of Analysis

A total of 665 different television commercials were sampled from Hong Kong and China. It comprised of 341 commercials taped from two English and two Chinese channels in Hong Kong during December 1 to 8, 1993 and 324 commercials taped from four television channels in China during December 11 to 18, 1993. The China sample came from China Central Television (CCTV), the national channel, and three regional channels in Guang Dong Province. The taping of China advertising was commissioned to a local research agency in Guang Dong and later transported to Hong Kong. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used to select commercials in twenty-eight broadcast hours on different viewing days and time zones for each of the two sub-samples. Any duplicate commercial occurring more than once on the same language channel were not included in order to eliminate the bias from broadcast frequency of commercials. In view of the occasional difference in advertising copy, Hong Kong commercials with Chinese and English versions were treated as two separate commercials. However, China commercials with Putonghwa and Cantonese versions were treated as one single commercial. The unit of analysis is the individual television commercial.

All commercials were videotaped and later replayed for content analysis. Two Chinese graduates with competence in English, Putonghwa and Cantonese were recruited as coders. They were trained and tested on a pilot exercise of 50 commercials until they reached a predetermined level of inter-coder reliability. They viewed the taped commercials independently to determine the presence of each of the 14 information cues and the style of advertising. The sample was then re-examined by the author for checking and resolving for any disagreement which had occurred. An inter-coder reliability level of 97% and 86% were achieved for the information content and style of advertising respectively. This exceeds the minimum reliability level of 85% specified by Kassirjian (1977).

The content of Hong Kong's and China's television advertising are compared based on their information contents and the execution styles. Both t-tests and Chi-square tests are conducted. The t-tests will investigate whether there are any significant differences between Hong Kong's and China's commercials in terms of percentage of informative commercials. Chi-square tests study whether the information content will depend on the characteristics of commercials and type of products advertised.

Results

Table 1 shows the distribution of commercials among different product categories, broadcast day, time, channel and duration. The results indicate that majority of the Hong Kong sample were servicing/retailing (45%) and durable (22%) commercials. For the China sample, drug, food and beverages and durables contributed over sixty percent of the total sample. The ratio of weekday to weekend commercials for the Hong Kong sample was about two to one while that of China was about one to one. Over eighty percent of the commercials were broadcast during the prime time for both Hong Kong and China. For the Hong Kong sample, two thirds were broadcast in Chinese while one third was in English. For the China sample, sixty percent were carried by the Guang Dong channels and the rest were carried by the CCTV, the national channel. The China sample contained a larger proportion of shorter commercials.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 summarizes the number of information cues per commercials for the Hong Kong and China television commercials. Of the 341 sampled commercials from Hong Kong, 192 (56%) contained at least one information cue and were therefore classified as informative commercials. Of the 324 sampled commercials from China, 189 (58%) were informative. The Hong Kong sample had a higher percentage of commercials that contained at least two, three and four information cues.

The total number of information cues for the Hong Kong sample was 340, with an average of 1.0 cue per commercial. The total number of information cues for the China sample was 289, with an average of 0.9 cue per commercial. Hong Kong and China advertising was very similar in terms of level of information content.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 summarizes the appearance of all fourteen information cues in descending order of frequency in Hong Kong and China television advertising. The type of information cues featured in Hong Kong and China advertising were quite similar. The most frequently occurring information cues in Hong Kong advertising were availability, performance, components/contents and quality. The most common featured information cues in China advertising were also performance, quality, components/contents and availability. The four most frequently occurring information cues in both samples were the same except there was a

difference in the rank orders. Neither Hong Kong nor China advertising contained information cues on packaging superiority.

For the Hong Kong sample, eight out of the fourteen information cues appeared in less than five percent of the commercials. For the China sample, ten out of the fourteen information cues appeared in less than five percent of the commercials. Hong Kong commercials contains a wider variety of different information cues while China advertising are more concentrated on the four major information cues.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Two-sample t-tests were conducted to test the difference in percentages of commercials containing a particular information cue. The results are shown in Table 4. Hong Kong advertising contained a higher proportion of information cues on 'special offer', 'availability', 'price' and 'independent research' than that of China advertising. However, China advertising contained a higher proportion of information cues on 'performance'.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Chi-square tests were conducted to investigate whether information content of television commercials would depend on the advertised product category. The results are shown in Table 5. There was a strong relationship between product category and information content for both Hong Kong and China commercials. For the Hong Kong sample, drug and non-durables commercials were most informative. Liquor commercials were least informative as none of the fifteen sampled commercials were informative. For the China sample, non-durables and drug commercials were also most informative and cigarette and liquor commercials were least

informative. Product category was the most important variable in determining information content of a commercial in Hong Kong as well as in China.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Chi-square tests were employed to investigate whether percentages of informative commercials would depend on characteristics of commercials. The results indicated that for both Hong Kong and China samples, percentage of informative commercials were not dependent on characteristics including broadcast day, time, channel or duration. There was no indication that commercials of any particular broadcast day, time, channel or duration would be most or least informative. This further illustrated that information content was mainly determined by product category advertised, and not characteristics of commercials.

Tables 6 shows the execution style of Hong Kong and China advertising. Slice-of-life and mood and image styles were most commonly used in Hong Kong as well as in China advertising. Hong Kong advertising contained a higher proportion of scientific evidence commercial while the China advertising contained a higher proportion of personality symbol style of commercial.

TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

Chi-square tests were conducted to investigate whether information content of television commercial would depend on the advertising execution style. The results are shown in Table 7. There was a strong relationship between execution style and information content. For both Hong Kong and China advertising, nearly all commercials in scientific evidence style were informative. Hong Kong advertising contained a higher proportion of informative commercials

in slice-of-life execution style. China advertising contained a higher proportion of informative commercials in mood and image execution style.

TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

Discussions and conclusion

Hong Kong Chinese and Mainland Chinese share the same racial origin but they differ much in cultural emphasis, advertising environment and market situation (Table 8). These factors sometimes have contradicting pulling force on advertising information content and message presentation styles. For example, as a more westernized and individualistic society, Hong Kong advertising calls for higher level of information content to satisfy consumers that well aware of their right-to-know in making an optimal purchase decision. However, the well-established advertising environment also calls for more sophisticated, soft-sell and symbolic approaches that will lower its information level.

TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE

The results indicates that Hong Kong and China advertising are very similar in the level of information content. The percentage of informative commercials and the average information cue per commercials are very similar. However, the advertising messages differ mainly in types of information communicated and presentation styles.

In Hong Kong advertising, 'availability' was the most frequently occurring information cue. One of the main reason is the type of products advertised. The present sample contained an overwhelming (45%) proportion of servicing and retail commercials like banks, transport and

travel services, telecommunication services and fashion shops. Unlike tangible products, services need to be consumed on the spot at specific locations. It is very common for these commercials to include the address of the sales outlet or telephone number for customer services. There is also a gradual emergence of direct response commercials that include telephone number for ordering of products. Inclusion of telephone number for corporate commercials also gives an image of customer-friendliness and accessibility.

In China advertising, 'performance' was the most frequently occurring information cue. One of the main reason is again the type of products advertised. One of the most striking observation of Chinese television advertising was its abundance of pharmaceutical and health products commercials. Most of them carry information on performance (i.e. kind of health problems handled) but no other cues. Information content in China advertising concentrates mainly on performance, quality and component/contents. They fail to provide a variety of cues that consumers need for purchase decisions, like nutrition, safety, price, independent and company research.

Hong Kong and China advertising have differences in featuring of performance, special offer, availability, price and independent research. As the retail market in Hong Kong is more mature, it frequently employs various promotional gimmicks like lucky draw, seasonal sales, game and quiz, price reduction and special offers to drive sales. As a result, Hong Kong commercials contain a higher proportion of information cues on special offer, availability and price.

Advertising regulations also contribute to the difference in advertising content. In Hong Kong, factual claims and best-selling claims are governed by the Television Code of Practice on Advertising Standards (Broadcast Authority, 1993). It states that all factual claims have to be substantiated by research or testing. The source and date of the research have to be indicated in the commercial. Best-selling claims need to be further substantiated by independently audited

sales figures or results of sample surveys. As a consequence, Hong Kong advertising contains a higher proportion of commercials with information cue on independent research.

Unlike the practice in Hong Kong, visual or audio presentation of research substantiation of factual claims and best-selling claims are not required in China television advertising. As China advertising contains a large proportion of drug and health products commercials, lack of control on factual claims leads to a grey area of deceptive advertising. Many drug and health products commercials spell out numerous claims on effectiveness but most of them do not provide research substantiation.

In both Hong Kong and China advertising, slice-of-life style of message execution are most commonly employed. This may be due to the fact that Chinese consumers are quite practical and advertisers prefer to show their products and services in natural settings. Slice-of-life style is often used in service and retail advertising in Hong Kong while it is frequently employed in pharmaceuticals and food advertising in China. Mood and image style is usually used for durables advertising in Hong Kong and China. Hong Kong advertising has a higher proportion of scientific evidence commercials. However, slice-of-life advertising is more likely to contain information in Hong Kong than in China. This may suggest that creative personnel in Hong Kong skillfully incorporates factual information in natural product-in-use settings.

Hong Kong advertising and China advertising had both undergone a rapid change in the information content. Compared with previous replicated studies by Chan (1986) and Keown, Jacobs, Schmidt and Ghymn (1992), Hong Kong television advertising demonstrates an increase in information level while China television advertising illustrates an decrease in information level. Hong Kong advertising is becoming more direct, hard-sell and rational. On the other hand, China advertising is becoming more indirect, soft-sell and image-oriented.

Advertising is seen as means of influencing consumer attitudes and purchase behaviors in many ways. Informative commercials may be more successful in creating brand awareness

and communicating attributes. Image-oriented commercials without objective information cues also work in brand positioning. In particular with fast-moving consumer goods, the consumers are very familiar with most available brand on the market and the reasons for choosing one brand over another are often more trivial and subjective. The increasing use of image-oriented television advertising in China simply illustrates that advertisers are now more aware of the customers' needs and the multiple functions of advertising.

Hong Kong commercials display a wider variety of information cues and China commercials display mainly four major information cues. Mature retail market situation and strict advertising regulation contributed to the higher proportion of information cues on availability, price, special offer and independent research in Hong Kong advertising. China advertising contains a high proportion of pharmaceuticals and health products commercials and therefore featured more frequently on performance.

Hong Kong and China advertising are very similar in message presentation. Slice-of-life and mood and image styles are most frequently adopted. As market research is well-established and better understood by consumers in Hong Kong, the scientific evidence style is more frequently adopted in Hong Kong. A high proportion of slice-of-life advertising with information content in Hong Kong may also illustrate the sophistication of message execution. Information contents are more likely to be embedded in natural product settings in Hong Kong.

Many advertisers in Hong Kong are now moving their market emphasis from the limited market in Hong Kong to the huge potential consumer market in China. Due to the high information and entertainment value of television programs in Hong Kong, China consumers are very eager to watch Hong Kong channels by various efforts. China advertisers and advertising agents sometimes even imitate the entire advertising copy and presentation format. In the sample commercials, a stomach-ache killer commercial in China used a similar product name and advertising copy lines of a market leader in Hong Kong. As China market matures, it is

expected that the difference in information content and execution styles between Hong Kong and China advertising will be narrowed.

As the current study is mainly from the marketer's point of view, further research on the perceived information value from the consumer standpoint will provide us a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of advertising in Hong Kong and China. For advertisers aiming at the global Chinese markets, understanding the cultural influence on message strategies helps to select the right message, the right presentation and for the right target.

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Table 1 Profile of the Hong Kong and China sample

| Characteristics of Commercials | Hong Kong | | China | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----|-------|-----|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| Total no. of commercials | 341 | 100 | 324 | 100 |
| Product Category | | | | |
| Servicing/Retail | 152 | 45 | 36 | 11 |
| Durables | 75 | 22 | 63 | 19 |
| Non-durables | 48 | 14 | 57 | 18 |
| Food & Beverages | 39 | 11 | 60 | 19 |
| Drug | 12 | 4 | 83 | 26 |
| Cigarette & Liquor | 15 | 4 | 25 | 8 |
| Broadcast day | | | | |
| weekday | 217 | 64 | 159 | 49 |
| weekend | 124 | 36 | 165 | 51 |
| Time | | | | |
| Prime | 286 | 84 | 286 | 88 |
| Fringe | 55 | 16 | 38 | 12 |
| Channel | | | | |
| Chinese | 224 | 66 | | |
| English | 117 | 34 | | |
| Guang Dong | | | 186 | 57 |
| National | | | 138 | 43 |
| Duration | | | | |
| < 20 seconds | 90 | 26 | 134 | 41 |
| 20-30 seconds | 237 | 70 | 188 | 58 |
| 31+ seconds | 14 | 4 | 2 | 1 |

Table 2 Information content of Hong Kong and China television advertising

| No. of information cues per commercial | Hong Kong | | China | |
|---|-----------|----|-------|----|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| No cue | 149 | 44 | 135 | 42 |
| At least 1 cue | 192 | 56 | 189 | 58 |
| At least 2 cues | 103 | 30 | 77 | 24 |
| At least 3 cues | 37 | 11 | 20 | 6 |
| 4 or more cues | 6 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Total no. of cues | 340 | | 289 | |
| Sample size | 341 | | 324 | |
| Mean cue per commercial | 1.0 | | 0.9 | |

Table 3 Information cues contained in Hong Kong and China television advertising

| Rank | Hong Kong | | China | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----|-------|-----------------------|-----|----|
| | Information cue | No. | % | Information cue | No. | % |
| 1 | Availability | 72 | 21 | Performance | 127 | 39 |
| 2 | Performance | 66 | 19 | Quality | 66 | 20 |
| 3 | Components/Contents | 60 | 18 | Components/Contents | 44 | 14 |
| 4 | Quality | 53 | 16 | Availability | 31 | 10 |
| 5 | Special Offer | 39 | 11 | Guarantees/Warrantees | 5 | 2 |
| 6 | Price | 23 | 7 | Special Offer | 4 | 1 |
| 7 | Independent Research | 12 | 4 | New Ideas | 4 | 1 |
| 8 | Guarantees/Warrantees | 6 | 2 | Price | 3 | 1 |
| 9 | New Ideas | 6 | 2 | Nutrition | 2 | 1 |
| 10 | Nutrition | 5 | 1 | Independent Research | 1 | 0 |
| 11 | Company Research | 1 | 0 | Taste | 1 | 0 |
| 12 | Taste | 0 | 0 | Safety | 1 | 0 |
| 13 | Safety | 0 | 0 | Company Research | 0 | 0 |
| 14 | Packaging | 0 | 0 | Packaging | 0 | 0 |
| Total No. of cues | | 340 | | 289 | | |

Note: Each commercial can contain more than one information cue and therefore the percentages do not sum up to 100.

Table 4 T-tests on percentage of commercials containing a specific information cue in Hong Kong and China advertising

| Information cue | % of H.K. commercials | % of China commercials | t-value | Significance |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|---------|--------------|
| Performance | 19.4 | 39.2 | 5.7 | <0.001 |
| Special Offer | 11.4 | 1.2 | 5.6 | <0.001 |
| Availability | 21.1 | 9.6 | 4.2 | <0.001 |
| Price | 6.7 | 0.9 | 4.0 | <0.001 |
| Independent Research | 3.6 | 0.3 | 2.5 | <0.01 |
| Quality | 15.5 | 20.4 | 1.6 | N.S. |
| Components/Content | 17.6 | 13.6 | 1.4 | N.S. |
| Nutrition | 1.5 | 0.6 | 1.1 | N.S. |
| Taste | 0.0 | 0.3 | 1.0 | N.S. |
| Safety | 0.0 | 0.3 | 1.0 | N.S. |
| Company Research | 0.3 | 0.0 | 1.0 | N.S. |
| New Ideas | 1.8 | 1.2 | 0.9 | N.S. |
| Guarantees/Warrantees | 1.8 | 1.5 | 0.2 | N.S. |
| Packaging | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | N.S. |

Note: N.S.= not significant at 0.01 level

Table 5 Information content by product category

| Product category | Hong Kong | | | China | | |
|--------------------|-----------|----|----|--------|----|----|
| | N | I | % | N | I | % |
| Drug | 12 | 10 | 83 | 84 | 62 | 74 |
| Non-durables | 48 | 33 | 69 | 55 | 42 | 76 |
| Servicing/Retail | 152 | 89 | 59 | 36 | 14 | 39 |
| Durables | 75 | 40 | 53 | 62 | 37 | 60 |
| Food & Beverages | 39 | 20 | 51 | 62 | 30 | 48 |
| Cigarette & Liquor | 15 | 0 | 0 | 25 | 4 | 16 |
| Chi-square value | 26.9 | | | 42.0 | | |
| Significance level | <0.001 | | | <0.001 | | |

Note: N = Number of commercials
 I = Informative commercials
 % = Percentage of informative commercials

Table 8 Major differences in culture, advertising environment and market situation of Hong Kong and China advertising

| Dimension of influence | Hong Kong | China |
|--|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. Culture | relatively individualism | relatively collectivism |
| 2. Advertising industry environment | | |
| Per capita ad expenditure (1993) | HK\$1,897 | RMB11 (equivalent to HK\$10) |
| % of ad expenditure to GDP/GNP (1993) | 1.3 | 0.4 |
| Major advertisers in sample | servicing and retail | pharmaceuticals |
| Availability of commercial breaks during program | yes | no |
| 3. Market situation | | |
| Market development stage | mature | developing |
| Freedom of market | very high due to free economy | low to middle due to planned and free economy |
| Distribution network | well-established and systematic | developing |

Note: Some of the analysis originates from Sin (1995)'s summary