A Categorical Content Analysis of Super Bowl Commercials from 2015 to 2020

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The Super Bowl has become a cultural phenomenon rather than just a sporting event in the United States (Nielsen, 2020). With investments of over $5.5 million on a 30-second Super Bowl ad, corporations are eager to creatively capitalize on an average of 105 million viewership for the big game each year (Statista, 2020). The lack of empirical evidence regarding the relationships between variables and affective response of Super Bowl commercials led to the formation of this study.

Considering an ever-changing business environment and a constant increase in advertising cost, there is an urgent need for empirical research on recent trends in Super Bowl commercials. Such research is imperative to gain better understanding of consumers’ reactions to the design and implementation of the Super Bowl advertising, which is closely related to the success of the firm’s marketing practices. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is two-fold: 1) to examine the advertising appeals used in Super Bowl commercials; and 2) to explore the relationship between the appeals and the consumers’ affective responses to the commercials.

To achieve the goals, the Super Bowl commercials aired between 2015-2020 and USA Today Ad Meter scores were analyzed using the content analysis and analysis of variance (ANOVA). The USA Today Ad Meter scores were operationalized as the consumers’ likeability of a commercial. Two trained coders independently coded 362 Super Bowl commercials. This code scheme included product categories, information cues, and emotional and rational appeals. Intercoder reliability for each factor was estimated based on Krippendorff’s alpha. The substantial agreement between two coders was achieved with the coefficient of .90.

The results showed that food and beverage (19.2%) was the most advertised product followed by automobiles (11.8%), alcoholic beverage (11.6%), and technology (10.9%). Regarding the advertising appeals, 83.3% of the commercials used only emotional appeals. Specifically, for the types of emotional appeals, humor (50.5%) was most frequently used, followed by potential (10.1%), and adventure (7.1%). ANOVA results revealed that consumers perceived emotional advertising (M = 5.61, SD = .89) more favorably than rational advertising (M = 4.98, SD = .69) (Missing F-value and p-value?), whereas there were insignificant differences in the consumers’ likeability across product types and types of emotional appeals (F = .07, p = .79 and F = 2.11, p = .16 respectively).

Regarding the amount of information presented in the Super Bowl ads, each commercial contained an average of two informational cues while 16.7% did not contain any cues. This is consistent with the findings of Kim, Cheong and Kim’s study (2012) investigating the Super Bowl ads in 2001-2009. Commercials presenting the quality and performance of the product were rated more favorably than those with other informational cues. By looking into the most recent advertising strategies employed in the context of Super Bowls, findings from this research develop the sport advertising literature and provide empirical insights for practitioners to better utilize the sporting event as a media platform and improve their marketing performance.