



# Functional and experiential routes to persuasion: An analysis of advertising in emerging versus developed markets

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## ABSTRACT

Should advertising be approached differently in emerging than in developed markets? Using data from 256 television commercial tests conducted by a multinational fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs) company in 23 countries, we consider two routes of persuasion: a functional route, which emphasizes the features and benefits of a product, and an experiential route, which evokes sensations, feelings, and imaginations. Whereas in developed markets the experiential route mostly drives persuasion, the functional route is a relatively more important driver in emerging markets. In addition, we find a differential impact of local/global and traditional/modern. This finding does not hold for individualistic versus collectivistic ad appeals between emerging and developed markets. We discuss implications of our finding for advertising in emerging markets and for the development of a global consumer culture.

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## 1. Introduction

The advertising industry in emerging markets (EMs) is of increasing importance. After the global recession that followed the late-2000s financial crisis, global advertising spending has been on the increase again, but this increase largely stems from the emerging countries in the Asia Pacific, Middle East/Africa, and Latin America regions rather than in the developed markets (DMs) in Europe, the U.S., Australia and Japan. According to a 2011 Nielsen's report ([www.nielsen.com](http://www.nielsen.com)), EMs will continue to lead global ad spending for many years to come, with fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs) representing the category with the highest expected rate of growth.

Prior research has enriched our understanding of how consumers process and respond to advertisements. However, this research has been conducted almost exclusively in high income, industrialized nations (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006). There may be important differences in ad processing between DMs and EMs, for example, in the

way consumers perceive advertising messages and advertising appeals. Consider an FMCGs company that sells a shampoo, razor, or cleaning product. In EMs, contextual factors affecting the brand (e.g., water availability and purity, bathroom facilities in households, as well as the retail and local selling environment) may be quite different from those in DMs. These factors may affect how consumers perceive the advertisements for these brands—for example, the functional benefits communicated in the ads, the sensory and emotional components, or the various image appeals in the ads.

In this research, we empirically investigate whether consumers in EMs process ads differently than consumers in DMs. We focus specifically on the relative effects of functional and experiential routes of ad persuasion. In addition, we investigate the effects of socio-cultural ad appeals on ad processing in EMs and DMs, including perceived referential appeals (local versus global), innovativeness appeals (modern versus traditional), and group-related cultural appeals (individualistic versus collectivistic).

## 2. Conceptual framework and hypothesis development

### 2.1. Functional and experiential approaches in advertising

At a broad level, marketing researchers (e.g., Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999) have created an information processing framework of the ad persuasion process in which the advertising message (i.e., the input of the process) generates an internal consumer response, which, in turn, affects consumer behavior (i.e., the output). According to some models

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(e.g., Barry & Howard, 1990), advertising results in, and should be measured in, specific behaviors (product purchase, trial, and adoption), while other models suggest measuring ad impact in terms of attitude formation and change (Copper & Croyle, 1984; Olson & Zanna, 1993; Petty & Wegener, 1997; Tesser & Shaffer, 1990).

A large body of research has concentrated on the link between the type of ad message and the internal response. Broadly speaking, an advertising message can be described in terms of its functional-rational or emotional-experiential components (Heath, 2011). The two types of messages have been referred to in various ways in the advertising literature, such as “informational” versus “transformational” (Rossiter & Percy, 1987), “utilitarian” versus “value-expressive” (Johar & Sirgy, 1991), “hard-sell” versus “soft-sell” (Okazaki, Mueller, & Taylor, 2010), and “central” versus “peripheral” messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In this paper, we will use the terms “functional” and “experiential.” The functional aspects of an ad include the utilitarian references to product features (e.g., attributes, applications, and performance) as well as the benefits and value generated from these features, resulting in a cognitive consumer response (e.g., evaluation) (Abernethy & Franke, 1996). In contrast, the experiential aspects of an ad evoke sensations, feelings, emotions, imaginations, and lifestyles, thus resulting in an affective response (e.g., liking) (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt, 1999).

It should be noted that almost all ads (and certainly the ones used in our empirical studies) include, to some degree, both functional and experiential components. Moreover, the two approaches (targeting cognitions with the functional ad component and targeting affect with the experiential component) may be viewed as two different routes of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). As routes of persuasion, they are not mutually exclusive: advertising communications can adopt either one of the two approaches, or both; in the latter case, cognitive and affective responses are activated simultaneously (De Pelsmacker, Geuens, & Van den Bergh, 2007). Finally, the two internal consumer responses (cognitive and affective) may be related: a positive, cognitive evaluation may, in itself, trigger affect; conversely, an affective response or feeling may trigger a reflective cognitive response to explain its source or justify why the feeling occurred (Chaiken, 1980; Forgas, 1995; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

## 2.2. Ad processing differences across markets

Turning to the central question of this research, do we expect any differences in the effectiveness of functional and experiential routes to persuasion between DMs and EMs? To answer this question, it must be addressed in the context of the broader changes occurring in DMs and EMs.

In his influential work, Inglehart (1977, 1990) showed that economic development and value change are co-existing effects. That is, the process of economic and technological development triggers changes in individuals' basic values and beliefs (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Prior sociological research has shown that early market capitalism resulted in what sociologist Max Weber called the “disenchantment of the world,” stressing rationality and functional utility (Weber, 1978). Following Weber (1978), Inglehart (1977, 1990) argued that industrialization leads to a shift from traditional to secular-rational values. In advertising, rationality and functional utility is reflected in a predominance of cognitive responses that reflect product application, product performance, and benefits that provide functional value. However, later forms of capitalism (or “post-industrialization”) result in a postmodern society and “re-enchantment” and a shift toward post-materialist, emotional values (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Inglehart, 1977, 1990; Jenkins, 2000; Ritzer, 2005), where hedonic, emotional, and imaginative ads become more important. In other words, as markets mature, consumers take functional features for granted, that is, they know when a product works and are less impressed by the functional attributes displayed in the ads. Thus, they focus on deriving a positive affect from the experiential

ad components and become subject to an experiential route of persuasion (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Indeed, in DMs, where practically all prior ad research has been conducted, a shift from the functional toward the more experiential communications has been reported over the years (Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt, Rogers, & Vrotsos, 2003).

However, what about the consumers in EMs? We propose that consumers still primarily respond to functionality because these markets are in earlier stages of capitalism and market development. During the early stages of market development, consumers are more concerned about fulfilling basic rather than high-order needs. Basic needs closely relate to the functional aspects of products, whereas higher-order needs can be fulfilled via the sensory and emotional aspects of products (e.g., aesthetics and self-expression). Finally, consumers in EMs often lack participation in a global consumer market place and are thus less experienced; they are still learning about products and brand differentiation. In sum, we would expect that consumers in EMs are most persuaded by functional advertising communications and engage in cognitive processing, which is subject to a functional route to persuasion. Accordingly, our overall hypothesis can be stated as follows:

*In DMs, the experiential route (with experiential messages influencing affect) best describes the advertising process of persuasion. However, in EMs, the functional route (with functional messages influencing cognition) best describes the process of persuasion.*

Thus far, we have discussed the relation between functional and experiential aspects of an ad on cognition and affect. However, it is not only ad components per se (functional versus experiential) that influence cognitive and affective ad processing. In addition, ads contain, in their execution styles, certain socio-cultural appeals that are also likely to affect ad processing as well. These socio-cultural ad appeals, being tied to different social and cultural contexts, may result in differential effects between DMs and EMs. Prior social and cultural research has identified several key socio-cultural constructs that have been shown to affect a broad range of consumer behavior. These constructs include a perceived *reference dimension* (local versus global culture) (Ritzer, 1993), an *innovativeness dimension* (modern versus traditional culture) (Inglehart, 1997), and, most importantly, a *group-related dimension* (individualism versus collectivism) (Hofstede, 1980). We next offer some tentative predictions regarding the effects of socio-cultural ad appeals on affect and cognition in general, and how such effects may vary across DMs and EMs.

## 2.3. Socio-cultural ad appeals and their effect across markets

Based on prior conceptualizations of socio-cultural appeals and on prior research, we expect that ads that appear to connect to a global community rather than a particular culture, ads that appear to be modern in their appeals rather than traditional, and ads that are individualistic rather than collectivistic will result in increased or decreased cognitive and/or affective processing. Most importantly, we expect that these socio-cultural appeals affect cognition and affect DMs and EMs differently.

Regarding the global versus local reference dimension, as part of his work on economic development and cultural change, Norris and Inglehart (2009) recently stressed the role of communications, arguing that in the 21st century, cultural change is driven by information that transcends local communities and national borders and can be characterized as cosmopolitan and global in nature. Global communications represent a global consumer culture that includes symbols and messages that are universally understood by a global community (Ritzer, 1993; Watson, 1997). Advertising contributes to the global consumer culture through what Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra (1999) have called “global consumer culture positioning” (GCCP) in contrast to “local consumer culture positioning” (LCCP) (see also Ford, Mueller, &

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