



# Consumers' reactions to global versus local advertising appeals: A test of culturally incongruent images in China



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## ABSTRACT

This study experimentally examines consumers' reactions to culturally incongruent images in advertising, which are characterized by a mix of global and local cultural elements and symbols featured in product advertisements. Drawing on the persuasion knowledge perspective, the authors argue how advertising image incongruence in the globalized marketing communication context of China may lead to consumers' use of persuasion knowledge (i.e., beliefs about the agent's persuasive tactics) and result in unfavorable attitudes toward the advertisements. This research contributes to a better understanding of the interplay between global and local consumer cultures in a globalized marketplace.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most important challenges facing international marketing and advertising managers today is the need to find the right balance of the conflicting influences of global and local consumer cultures (Arnett, 2002). In many parts of the developing world, Western/foreign brands and global elements of consumption are well received. Behind these global symbols is a corresponding set of traditional values and norms that define local identities. In China and other Asian countries, for example, global and local cultural influences have resulted in a mix of foreign and local goods, images, advertising appeals and consumption (Neelankavil, Venkatapparao, & Sessions, 1994; Zhou & Belk, 2004; Zhou, Yang, & Hui, 2010). The conceptualization of local and global identities by Arnett (2002) suggests that there is a complex interplay between local context and global content, which makes it hard to argue for the primacy of one over the other.

While previous research has explored the ways in which consumers aspire, reject, or identify the cultural meanings of advertisements among conflicting values in a globalizing world (e.g., Hung, Li, & Belk, 2007; Zhou & Belk, 2004), this study investigates the effects of culturally incongruent advertising images on consumers' evaluative responses to advertisements. Specifically, this paper focuses on one specific type of culturally incongruent advertising image which is defined as the mismatch between *model ethnicity* and the *culture of origin of the product*

*category*. For instance, an incongruence of advertising image will appear when a Western model is used to promote an Eastern culture associated product, and vice versa. The study reflects a central issue in advertising research with regard to the perceived fit of the advertising image with the viewer's contingent situation (Scott, 1994).

In the midst of conflicting influences of global and local cultural images in modern China (Hung et al., 2007; Zhou et al., 2010), this study intends to provide evidence on how the cultural incongruence between global and local elements affects consumers' cognitive and affective reactions to advertisements. Although the effect of incongruent advertising element on consumers' attitudes toward advertisements or brands has been well recognized in the related literature (e.g., Heckler & Childers, 1992; Lee & Mason, 1999), the theoretical rationale and general findings may not necessarily apply to the issues arising from a new cultural system consisting of a mixture of global and local elements.

This research involves two experimental studies to test the effects of culturally-based incongruence of advertising image (hereafter referred to as ad image) on Chinese consumers' responses. *Model ethnicity* is considered as one of the experimental factors largely due to the fact that the use of foreign models is a distinctive feature of most magazine advertising in modern China today (Hung et al., 2007). Also, advertisements using models with different cultural backgrounds reflect marketing effort for adaptation to local culture in international advertising strategy (Zhou & Belk, 2004). Besides this, model ethnicity has diverse effects on consumers' responses toward the type of product being advertised (Martin, Lee, & Yang, 2004).

Another experimental factor of interest is referred to as "culture of origin of product category" (COPC). Unlike the concept of country of origin (COO) for a product or a brand, COPC represents a product-culture association, which is defined as consumers' stereotypical beliefs about

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products that are associated with a particular culture of origin (Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop, & Mourali, 2005). For example, pizza is widely perceived as a Western/foreign product among Indian consumers, regardless of extensive localization efforts among marketers (Eckhardt, 2005). By the same token, lanterns and silk are typical products that are associated with Chinese traditions and culture. Other examples include Korean kimchi and Japanese sushi. By combining two types of model ethnicity (Western vs. Chinese) and two types of COPC (local vs. foreign) into an experimental design, this study is able to examine the incongruence effects of advertising images pertaining to the interplay between global and local cultural elements. Unlike previous research, this study focuses particularly on the mismatch between COPC and culturally based advertising images. As a result, this research extends the conceptual domain of advertising incongruity to culturally based elements or symbols, and provides novel insight about consumers' responses to the interplay involving global and local advertising appeals.

## 2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Local and global advertising images

While there are increasing tensions regarding consumer preferences for local vs. global identities (Zhang & Khare, 2009), consumers nowadays tend to simultaneously demand both global and local goods. According to Hung et al. (2007), even with the adoption of a global popular culture, consumers tend to scrutinize foreign goods and images through the lens of a local perspective. As a result, a new global cultural system is increasingly expressed in advertising and marketing communications as the ideology of contemporary consumption. This phenomenon is particularly apparent in the context of globalization in China (Hung et al., 2007). Similar to other developing countries, the consumers in China today are influenced by a mixture of foreign and local goods, images, advertising appeals and consumption (Davis, 2000; Nelson & Paek, 2007; Tai & Pae, 2002). Although the trend using Western advertising appeals seems still to be on the rise, foreign advertisers nowadays tend to locally adapt certain aspects of their advertisements to cater for the Chinese market (Cheong, Zheng, & Kim, 2011).

From a theoretical standpoint, the literature has reflected on an increasing number of studies that have used content analysis of advertisements to examine the effects of global and local advertising appeals (e.g., Tse, Belk, & Zhou, 1989; Zhang, 2009). The findings from these studies suggest that despite the fact that there has been an increase in the use of Western images and appeals in China's mass media, Chinese consumers embrace both traditional and contemporary foreign values. They tend to make sense of foreign features in the advertisements (Hung et al., 2007; Zhou & Belk, 2004). The primary function of this evaluation process is based on self-referencing responses of their own lifestyles and aspirations which are often constructed through the lens of traditional values and norms on one hand, and the authenticity and symbolism associated with global or Western images on the other (Ozsomer, 2012; Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003).

### 2.2. Image incongruence in advertising

The roots of image incongruence in advertising stem from earlier research relating to fit or the match-up effect between a celebrity or spokesperson and a particular product or brand characteristic (e.g., Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990). Prior research in this area suggests that in order for such advertising to be effective, a good match-up between the spokesperson image or personality and the nature of the product being advertised should exist. The basis for the effectiveness of endorser–product congruence in advertising can be linked to a variety of theoretical perspectives. Among them, schema-based explanations have been proven to be a useful framework (Lee & Thorson, 2008; Lynch & Schuler, 1994; Misra & Beatty, 1990).

Schema congruity occurs when the image of an endorser and the image of a product are relevant, such that the relationship between them can be readily accessible within the existing celebrity and/or product category (Lee & Thorson, 2008).

While the schema–congruity framework provides a key theoretical basis for a better understanding of advertising image congruence through matching the image of an endorser with a product, the design of previous research has not tended to fully address other aspects of image congruence in advertising. In particular, the match-up effect has not been examined in relation to the cultural elements of advertising appeals. As a result, this paper attempts to extend the match-up hypothesis by exploring the domain of globalized advertising. The purpose is to determine the possibility that consumers may respond less (vs. more favorably) to culturally incongruent advertising images.

### 2.3. Culturally incongruent advertising images and persuasion knowledge theory

Within the context of this study, culturally incongruent advertising images are characterized by a mismatch between the culture of origin of product category (COPC) and model ethnicity. They refer to the usage of a Western model/endorser on a typical local product (Eastern) or the usage of a local model/endorser (Eastern) on a typical Western product. Research drawing on schema-based explanation for the match-up effect suggests that a high degree of incongruity cannot be resolved within activated schemas or can only be resolved if major changes are made in the existing cognitive structure (Lee & Thorson, 2008). In response, this paper draws on the persuasion knowledge model (Freidstad & Wright, 1994, 1995) as an alternative theoretical perspective to explain consumer responses to culturally incongruent advertising images.

Freidstad and Wright (1994) was the first to propose the theory of persuasion knowledge. The theory asserts that consumers use their persuasion knowledge to recognize, analyze, interpret, and evaluate persuasion attempts. Central to persuasion knowledge is consumer perceptions of persuasion tactics that marketers can use to influence their beliefs, attitudes, decisions or actions. Such perceptions are significantly related to how consumers respond to persuasion attempts. As presented in the persuasion knowledge model (PKM), three knowledge structures would interact to shape and determine the outcomes of the marketers' persuasion attempts. These are: *persuasion knowledge*, *agent knowledge*, and *topic knowledge*. In an advertising context, persuasion knowledge refers to consumers' beliefs about the tactics or persuasion attempts used in advertising. Agent knowledge refers to consumers' beliefs and feelings about the advertiser while topic knowledge refers to consumers' beliefs about the advertised product. These knowledge structures develop over time as consumers are exposed to tactics and come to recognize them as such.

Surrounding the PKM model, several studies have been conducted. Campbell and Kirmani (2000) investigated conditions that influence consumers' use of persuasion knowledge in an interpersonal sales context. They proposed that persuasion knowledge is used when consumers draw an inference about a persuasion motive which may underlie a salesperson's behavior (such as flattering). These motive inferences then affect the consumers' perceptions about the salesperson. Campbell and Kirmani (2000) conducted four experimental studies with the use of role-playing scenarios to test their conceptual model, which described accessibility and cognitive capacity as underlying factors that influenced consumers' use of persuasion knowledge. The study indicates that persuasion knowledge can be activated fairly easy when persuasion motives are made accessible.

In an advertising context, Campbell (1995) found some evidence about consumers' use of persuasion knowledge in response to advertising tactics. By focusing on attention-getting tactics used in television advertising, she discovered how these tactics may sometimes lead consumers to infer that the advertiser is attempting to manipulate the

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