



Advertising persuasion in China: Using Mandarin or Cantonese?[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Advertising persuasion may differ based on different languages and/or dialects. Using Chinese samples, this study experimentally tests how a spokesperson's accents (standard Mandarin accent and local Cantonese accent) influence advertising persuasion across different product involvements (high- or low-involvement products) and different advertising appeals (rational or emotional ads). The results show that ads promoting high (low)-involvement products will produce higher persuasion when the ads use Mandarin (Cantonese) rather than Cantonese (Mandarin). In addition, ads with rational (emotional) appeals will result in higher persuasion when presented in Mandarin (Cantonese) rather than Cantonese (Mandarin). The findings contribute to a better understanding of an ad's persuasion with respect to a spokesperson's accents, and offer managerial implications for marketers doing advertising in a multilingual environment such as China.

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1. Introduction

Advertising persuasion may differ based on different languages and/or dialects. From a linguistic perspective, different dialects and accents provide clues for a receiver with respect to a variety of information about the characteristics of a speaker (DeShields & Kara, 2011). Research reveals that spokespeople who speak a standard accent can evoke more favorable judgments on competence and status dimensions than those who speak with a non-standard accent or dialect accent (DeShields, Oscar, & Kara, 1996; Edwards, 1982). In comparison to a standard accent, the literature provides a limited number of studies that have addressed the effects of local accent on an ad's persuasion. For example, Bell (1984) argued that a product for distinct regional consumers can adopt different advertising by including a different local accent. Though these prior studies provide some insights on why different accents generate different advertising persuasions, there are few studies within a Chinese context and it remains unclear how this advertising strategy works within a Chinese context.

China is a vast and complex market, and it is also a multi-dialect country. Thus, it is important to know how accents/dialects (such as Mandarin vs. Cantonese) affect the persuasiveness of an ad. In addition, it is interesting to know whether advertising appeals and product involvement would affect such accent effects. This study conducts two

experiments to investigate how these interrelated factors influence advertising persuasiveness in a Chinese context.

Specifically, this paper aims to test the differences in persuasion between a standard accent (the Mandarin accent) and a local accent (the Cantonese accent) for different types of products proposed as high involvement or as low involvement and also for different ad appeals such as rational appeals or emotional appeals. In addition, most studies measure consumer responses in terms of affective reactions, such as attitudes, or in terms of purchase intentions or behavior. This study is interested in the attitudes towards brands and a cognitive reaction, namely recall of the advertised context and the recognition of brand names, as they serve to cause consumer purchase intention.

2. Research background

Accent is one of the factors that may influence a receiver's judgments of the spokesperson over a wide range of quality attributes (Foon, 1986). Based on the spokespersons' vocal characteristics including accent, receivers evaluate personal characteristics by subjectively taking national identity into account (Brown, Giles, & Thakerar, 1985). For example, Luna and Peracchio (2001) find that advertising with the first-language is more favorable to bilingual consumers, not due to social or cultural factors, but the difficulty of processing the second-language, which is hard to conceptually connect and recollect. Luna, Peracchio, and Maria (2003) suggest that the consistency of image and language in advertising can help processing and recollection. In light of these findings, a standard language such as Mandarin in China may produce a higher level of advertising persuasion than a dialect such as Cantonese, because Mandarin as the common language in China produces a higher level of image consistency and connection across regions.

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According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Cacioppo, & Morris, 1983), consumer product involvement and ad appeals may also affect advertising persuasion as measured by credibility and likeability. Prior research demonstrates that in high product involvement situations, consumers depend more on the product-related information such as source credibility as the central route of persuasion (e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). The standard language may help enhance the source credibility because of its function to recollect and consistency of image (Luna et al., 2003; Lwin & Wee, 1999). Furthermore, rational appeals, which focus on consumers' rational thinking and functional requirements of product or brand (Resnick & Stern, 1977), may have a positive interplay with the standard language in producing a higher level of advertising persuasion.

In summary, we propose a conceptual model that takes into account interplays of spokesperson's accent, product involvement, and ad appeals in producing advertising persuasion in the Chinese context, as shown in Fig. 1.

3. Study 1

3.1. Hypotheses for Study 1

Prior research has consistently shown that the influences of message source characteristics on consumer attitudes and behaviors depend on the consumers' level of message processing motivation—that is, degree of involvement (Gorn, 1982). When consumers' product involvement is high, they tend to focus on central product cues such as information credibility in making buying decisions (e.g., Arora, Stoner, & Arora, 2006; Yilmaz, Telci, Bodur, & Iscioglu, 2011). One vocal factor that affects the spokesperson's credibility is accent (Lwin & Wee, 1999). A match between a spokesperson with a standard accent and a product is likely to lead to the perception that the spokesperson knows the product (Lalwani, Lwin, & Li, 2005). The congruency is likely to enhance the perceived credibility of the spokesperson. For example, Standard Mandarin may function to create a “snob appeal” to convey a product's prestigious image (Lalwani et al., 2005).

When consumers' product involvement is low, they may pay more attention to peripheral cues such as information likeability (Kahle & Homer, 1985). For example, advertisers may use colloquial language such as Cantonese to portray products used in everyday life, and childish language for products such as toys (Lalwani et al., 2005). Therefore, the study proposes that:

H1a. Ads promoting high-involvement products are likely to result in more favorable brand attitudes when the ads use Mandarin rather than Cantonese.

H1b. Ads promoting low-involvement products are likely to result in more favorable brand attitudes when the ads use Cantonese rather than Mandarin.

Similarly, high-involvement products tend to engender central processing, implying that consumers will exert the cognitive effort required to evaluate the issue-relevant arguments presented to them (Brown et al., 1985). Research reveals that commercials are more effective when viewed in high involvement programs, which in turn leads to an increase in memory (Luna & Peracchio, 2001; Singh, Rothschild, & Churchill, 1988). The standard accent may further facilitate processing and increase the likelihood that customers will remember the ad claims, because it is more congruent with high involvement products' credibility (Lalwani et al., 2005).

On the other hand, ad persuasion also is a function of the listeners perceiving the speaker as similar to themselves in accent (Krapfel & Robert, 1988). Lalwani et al. (2005) find that for low-involvement purchase decisions, a spokesperson who uses a similar accent as the raters will evoke more favorable judgments of likeability than a spokesperson who uses a dissimilar accent. The local accent ads such as ads in Cantonese may function to build a relational closeness with the local customers in the absence of other facilitating cues, and thus they may be more likely to remember the ads. Therefore, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2a. Ads promoting high-involvement products are likely to result in higher memory when the ads use Mandarin rather than Cantonese.

H2b. Ads promoting low-involvement products are likely to result in higher memory when the ads use Cantonese rather than Mandarin.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Experimental design

A low-involvement product and a high-involvement product were used in the study, respectively. To identify the high-involvement product, four products were carefully selected from the existing literature (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985) and modified in order to be coherent with the facets of involvement. It was also ensured that the products were relevant to the population at large, and to respondents of both genders. These four products include: computer, bicycle, battery and camera. The pre-test involved a convenience sample of 21 males and 20 females. Results indicated that the mean product involvement was the highest for computer ($M = 4.72$) and that there were no significant differences between male and female respondents in terms of their involvement ($p > .42$). Hence, computer was selected as the high-involvement

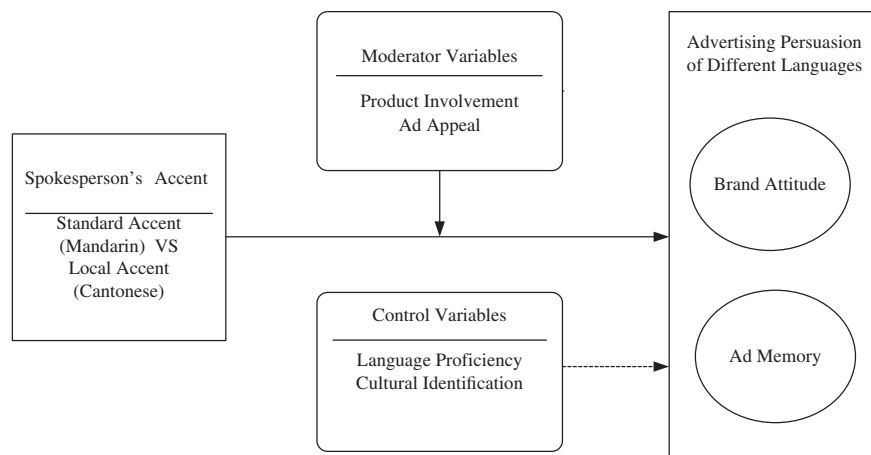


Fig. 1. The conceptual model.

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