



Effects of culturally verbal and visual congruency/incongruency across cultures in a competitive advertising context[☆]



Lefa Teng^{a,*}, Nan Ye^b, Ying Yu^c, Xiaochuang Wu^d

^a University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada

^b China University of Mining and Technology, Jiangsu, China

^c Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China

^d Central South University, Hunan, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 June 2011

Accepted 1 April 2013

Available online 1 July 2013

Keywords:

Culturally verbal congruency

Culturally visual congruency

Brand attitudes

Culture

Competitive advertising context

ABSTRACT

Existing consumer behavior theories suggest that consumers tend to recognize, better comprehend, and respond favorably to information that is both relevant and consistent with their beliefs and values. This study extends these theories by employing cultural arguments and pictures to examine the effects of culturally verbal and visual congruency/incongruency on consumer ad and brand attitudes in multiple-ad and multiple-brand environments. The studies were conducted with subjects in Canada and China. The results suggest that, when the contrast ad is culturally incongruent, an ad containing a culturally congruent argument and congruent picture elicits the most positive responses, compared to other ads with different combinations of arguments and pictures. However, an ad containing a culturally incongruent argument and incongruent picture also elicits more positive responses than an ad with a culturally congruent argument and incongruent picture or a culturally incongruent argument and congruent picture.

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1. Introduction

There is a large body of research that has highlighted the key role that cultural values play in the design of advertising messages (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Cheng, 1994; Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Khairullah, 1995; Lin, 2001; Mueller, 1987; Zandpour, Chang, & Catalano, 1992). It is not surprising then that advertising arguments often reflect the cultures of different consumer groups. Pictures, which have been shown to enhance the effectiveness of persuasive communications (Miniard, Bhatla, Lord, Dickson, & Unnava, 1991; Mitchell, 1986), may also reflect the cultural values and norms of target consumers. Although several studies have attempted to understand how cultural arguments influence consumer ad and brand attitudes (Mueller, 1987; Zhang & Gelb, 1996), there is a paucity of research on the effects of culturally congruent/incongruent arguments and pictures in advertisements in the consumer behavior and advertising literature. It is important to note, however, while several important studies have examined the effects of advertising arguments and pictures on consumer attitude and purchase intention separately (Holbrook & Batra, 1987; Miniard et al., 1991; Zhang & Gelb, 1996), little research

has focused on exploring how cultural arguments interact with cultural pictures to influence how consumers process advertising information, evaluate the ad, and form their brand attitude.

Existing consumer behavior theories have suggested that consistent or relevant information is more easily recognized, comprehended, and favorably evaluated by consumers (Heckler & Childers, 1992; Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1997; Srull, 1981). In addition, the cross-cultural literature indicates that the differing cultural values, norms and characteristics of consumers from various countries may be embedded in the advertising arguments and pictures directed at them. The goal of this study is to extend these theories by examining the effects of advertisements with culturally congruent and incongruent arguments and pictures on consumer ad and brand attitudes in multiple-ad and multiple-brand environments. Specifically, this research focuses on contrast effects in a competitive ad setting rather than simple congruency effects; our research more thoroughly explores, both conceptually and empirically, the nature of congruencies and incongruencies that may affect consumer ad and brand attitudes than previous studies have to date.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

Consumer and marketing research has long investigated the issues of congruency and incongruency (Goodman, 1980; Heckler & Childers, 1992; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989), as well as verbal and nonverbal combinations in print ads (Edell & Keller, 1989; Houston, Childers, & Heckler, 1987; Miniard et al., 1991). However, existing studies have produced conflicting results. Some studies demonstrate

[☆] They would like to thank Sarah Clemente and Sourav Ray for their invaluable comments on this research. The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of OMAFRA (#200261).

* Corresponding author at: Department of Marketing and Consumer Studies, University of Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1, Canada. Tel.: +1 519 824 4120x53818; fax: +1 519 8231964.

E-mail address: leteng@uoguelph.ca (L. Teng).

that congruent information is more easily recognized and comprehended, and encourages consumers to mentally complete their own images (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1997; Srull, 1981) while other studies show that mildly incongruent information might lead to more elaboration and persuasion than fully congruent information. Compared with incongruent information, congruent information may lead to greater recall of that information in an ad (Heckler & Childers, 1992). Taken together, these theories suggest that an ad with a culturally congruent argument and picture will tend to elicit more favorable thoughts than one without these two key characteristics. Prior studies, however, have not explored the effects of advertising argument and picture combinations in relation to different cultures in a competitive environment on consumer ad and brand attitudes. In the following section, key concepts from cross-cultural and information processing research, which together form the theoretical foundation of our experiment, are discussed and integrated.

2.1. Culture and the verbal advertising component

Numerous researchers have reported that Eastern and Western cultures are fundamentally different. For example, Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1994) state that Eastern cultures emphasize attending to and fitting in with others, with individuals seeking a harmonious interdependence with members of their community. In contrast, Western cultures stress attending to the self and asserting one's independence from others. Interdependent self-construals are illustrative of collectivistic cultures, whereas independent self-construals are representative of individualistic cultures (Gudykunst, 1997; Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomy, Kim, & Heyman, 1996; Kagitcibasi, 1997; Singelis & Sharkey, 1995). It has been pointed out that China is a collectivistic culture, whereas North America is an individualistic culture (Hofstede, 1980; Hui, 1988; Hui & Triandis, 1986). Members of collectivist societies are more focused on the in-group and its needs, goals, and interests whereas those of individualist societies are more centered on their individual needs, goals, and interests. Such cultural values are considered not only as the governing ideas and directing principles for thoughts and actions in a given society (Douglas & Urban, 1977), but also as a powerful force that shapes consumers' lifestyles, motivations, and overall purchase behavior. These values influence how consumers recognize their needs, search for information and evaluate products and alternatives (Andrews, Lysonski, & Durvasula, 1991; Triandis, 1981; Tse, Belk, & Zhou, 1989; Zandpour et al., 1992). For example, when Chinese consumers consider buying certain products, family considerations and opinions are highly considered. However, for North Americans, asserting one's individualism and expressing oneself through the purchase of products is often emphasized.

Advertising is considered a form of social communication that reflects the cultural values of a society (Andrews et al., 1991; Khairullah, 1995). Some cross-cultural researchers have included advertising arguments in their studies (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Cheng, 1994; Khairullah, 1995; Mueller, 1987; Zandpour et al., 1992; Zhang & Gelb, 1996). Their findings suggest that different cultures seem to emphasize different advertising arguments, with ads embedding the cultural values, norms, and characteristics of the country in which they are released. Chinese commercials, for example, often utilize arguments that are geared at reflecting traditional Chinese cultural values (e.g., an emphasis on family/group) in advertising content and strategy (Cheng, 1994; Lin, 2001). Conversely, North American commercials more commonly use arguments that reflect individualism, independence, self-sufficiency, and self-achievement (Zandpour et al., 1992).

Research suggests that culture may play a central role in shaping emotional experiences (Lutz, 1998). Cultural factors have been shown to influence how consumers respond to the content of advertisements (Tse et al., 1989) and their attitude toward both the advertisement and the promoted product (Andrews et al., 1991). Thus, members within an individualistic culture differ from members within a collectivistic

culture in terms of their affective responses to the cultural values and interests conveyed by an advertising argument.

2.2. Culture and the visual advertising component

In addition to the impact that advertising arguments have on consumer perceptions, pictures may also evoke affective responses that play an important role in the persuasion process (Burke & Edell, 1989; Edell & Burke, 1987; Holbrook & Batra, 1987). Pictures have been shown to enhance the persuasiveness of ads (Miniard et al., 1991; Mitchell, 1986). Furthermore, advertising pictures are thought to activate both visual and verbal message learning and processing by enhancing consumers' memories of other semantic information (Childers & Houston, 1984; MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986; Miniard et al., 1991). The literature suggests that pictures play such a central role in ads that, even without explicit product-relevant information, pictures still exert a considerable influence on the persuasiveness of advertisements (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1997). Pictures are thought to be more influential mostly due to their ability to evoke strong emotional responses from consumers (Mitchell, 1986; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Therefore, pictures in advertising can powerfully convey meaningful concepts, including cultural values, such as individualism and collectivism, and affect product perception (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1997; Scott, 1994). However, the particular concepts conveyed by pictures may vary depending on the contextual and individual factors in a given culture. Given the fact that pictures play such a key role in how consumers perceive both ads and the products portrayed in them, it is important to fill the gap in the literature and examine the role that pictures expressing various cultural values play in influencing consumer ad and brand attitudes.

2.3. Verbal and visual congruency/incongruency across cultures

Within one product category, there are often no significant attribute differences between brands and it is not the objective, intrinsic attributes of the advertised brand that influences consumers' behavior, but rather the emotional design of the ad (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1997). Consumers always compare ads, whether consciously or subconsciously, in order to identify the ad which most resonates with them. As such, other factors, such as cultural, verbal, and visual components, may play an important role in influencing consumer decision-making. This point is of particular relevance to marketing in an international context, because a company that appropriately tailors a global or domestic advertising strategy, to a local or foreign culture may enhance consumers' attitude toward the advertisement and brand.

Contrast effects are likely to occur in cross-cultural advertising. Consumers may compare their own cultural roots and values with the values reflected in the advertisements. In general, culturally congruent ad appeals are more effective than culturally incongruent ad appeals. That is, an ad appeal that appropriately matches with the cultural values of consumers (i.e., individualistic appeal used in an individualistic culture, collectivistic appeal used in a collectivistic culture) tends to illicit more positive ad and brand attitudes, and positively influences product choice, than ad appeals that do not match consumers' cultural values (i.e., collectivistic appeal used in an individualistic culture, individualistic appeal used in a collectivistic culture; Zhang & Gelb, 1996). For example, an individualistic appeal for a camera ("Come and Indulge in the Joy of Self Expression!") received greater attitude ratings among American subjects, whereas a collectivistic appeal ("Share the Moments of Joy and Happiness with Your Friends and Family!") enhanced attitude ratings among Chinese subjects.

A culturally congruent ad would be a North American ad that conveys individualistic values, and a Chinese ad that conveys collectivistic values. Individualistic and collectivistic cultural values and norms are portrayed in ads in both verbal (written) arguments and appeals and

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