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Crossing the cultural divide through bilingual advertising: The moderating role of brand cultural symbolism

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the roles of brand cultural symbolism and advertising type (i.e., bilingual vs. host country language) in influencing brand liking among biculturals (people who equally identify with two distinct cultures). Across four experiments, we show that a brand's cultural symbolism (or the degree to which a brand symbolizes a cultural group) moderates the impact of bilingual advertising (vs. English-language advertising) on brand liking among biculturals. Brands low in cultural symbolism can appeal to some types of biculturals by engaging in bilingual advertising, whereas there is no significant improvement in brand liking when bilingual advertising is paired with host-culture symbolic brands. This research also highlights the role of bicultural identity integration (BII), or the degree to which biculturals perceive their mainstream (host) and ethnic (home) identities as compatible (versus incompatible), as a key process mechanism that mediates these effects. We demonstrate that at high levels of BII, biculturals react more favorably to a bilingual ad than an English ad, but only for a less symbolic brand. At low levels of BII, advertising type has no significant effect on biculturals' brand evaluations.

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1. Introduction

There is a worldwide trend toward an increasingly multicultural consumer landscape, with nearly 232 million people living outside their home countries (United Nations, 2014) and the United States comprises many different multicultural groups. For example, the 2010 Census estimated that 16% of the U.S. population consists of Hispanics, 13% African Americans, and another 5% Asians. Ethnic groups such as Hispanics and Asians were also among the fastest-growing groups in the past decade, growing at a rate of 43% in a single decade from 2000 to 2010. The growth in ethnically diverse populations has significant implications for marketing, as companies are increasingly targeting this multi-ethnic population. Advertising in 2010 to Hispanics was estimated at around \$5.5 billion in gross advertising revenue (Edelhauser, 2000). Wal-Mart alone spends approximately \$60 million annually to reach Hispanics with ads deemed highly successful (Hernandez, 2013). One challenge in appealing to ethnically diverse populations is that members of these groups may be at different stages of acculturation, with varying receptiveness to ethnic marketing efforts.

One such group is bicultural individuals who identify with both their home and host cultures (Berry, 2005).

The focus of the current research is on understanding the impact of bilingual advertising on bicultural consumers' brand attitudes, and specifically how the brand's cultural symbolism moderates this impact. Prior research has examined various factors moderating the impact of bilingual advertising, including congruity between the ad picture and the text (Luna & Peracchio, 2001) and the extent of code switching on advertising persuasion (Luna & Peracchio, 2005) or type of product (Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008). We build on this stream of research by investigating the role of a brand's cultural symbolism in moderating the impact of bilingual advertising among bicultural consumers.

A brand's cultural symbolism captures the perceived consensus of the degree to which the brand symbolizes the abstract image of a certain cultural group (Torelli, Keh, & Chiu, 2010). Brands acquire cultural meanings through a collective effort influenced by advertising, the fashion system, and reference groups (McCracken, 1986; Monga & Lau-Gesk, 2007), and their cultural significance is a product of social consensus building (Torelli et al., 2010). For example, brands such as Levi's and Budweiser are highly symbolic of the United States, and brands such as Corona are symbolic of Mexico. Exposure to culturally symbolic or "iconic" brands and products should be more likely to activate the cultural schema than less culturally symbolic brands (Torelli & Ahluwalia, 2012). Does bilingual advertising work equally well for highly symbolic and less symbolic brands? In this research, we examine

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whether there are systematic differences in the appeal of bilingual and English-only ads in the context of highly symbolic brands and less culturally symbolic brands.

Biculturals differ in their subjective perceptions of host and home cultures. The degree to which biculturals perceive their mainstream (host) and ethnic (home) identities as compatible and integrated versus oppositional and difficult to integrate is known as “bicultural identity integration” (BII) (Haritatos & Benet-Martínez, 2002). At high levels of bicultural identity integration, biculturals perceive their dual cultural identities as compatible and easy to integrate. At high levels of bicultural identity integration, biculturals will react more positively to bilingual ads that appeal to their distinct ethnic identities. In contrast, at low levels of bicultural identity integration, biculturals are more likely to activate one cultural identity at a time and will perceive their cultural identities as distinct and oppositional. Research has also shown that biculturals who have lower levels of bicultural identity integration demonstrate behaviors that may contrast with cultural norms (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). Recent research has argued that “integrative complexity” (Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012), or the ability to combine multiple perspectives, is the key process explaining how biculturals can perform various tasks. In this research, we examine whether bilingual ads that appeal to multiple cultural identities can be more effective for low culturally symbolic brands than for high culturally symbolic brands. In summary, this research has two primary objectives. First, we examine the role of bilingual advertising in strengthening brand liking among biculturals and the role of brand cultural symbolism as a moderator of this effect. Additionally, we examine the role of BII as a mediator of this relationship. We test our hypotheses across a series of four experiments. We focus on one specific bicultural type in three studies (i.e., Hispanic Americans) and, to ensure generalizability, run a fourth study with another group of biculturals (i.e., Asian Americans). We designed Study 1 to assess brand preferences for a culturally symbolic and less culturally symbolic clothing brand among Hispanic Americans. The ads featured either English only or a combination of Spanish and English. Study 2 replicates Study 1 in a different context (i.e., beer brands) with Asian Americans (Indian and Chinese origin). The ads in Study 2 featured either English only or a combination of Hindi (or Chinese, for those of Chinese origin) and English. Study 3 replicates Study 2 with Hispanic American biculturals. In addition, Study 3 presents the role of BII in reactions to advertising language. Study 4 provides further insights into the role of BII mechanisms by directly manipulating this construct.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Bilingual advertising and biculturals

Previous research has used a few perspectives to explain the effect of language choice on advertising effectiveness for bilingual consumers. One of these perspectives is “affective response.” For example, Luna and Peracchio (2005) consider language effects from affective response perspective and find that some words arouse a more emotional attachment when presented in a native language rather than in the second language. In line with this finding, Noriega and Blair (2008) find that a person's native language may activate thoughts about family and friends. In turn, these thoughts contribute to more positive attitude measures and behavioral intentions, and the consumption context presented in the advertisement moderates these effects. Puntoni, De Langhe, and Van Osselaer (2009) show that marketing slogans expressed in consumers' native language tend to be perceived as more emotional than message expressed in their second language. In the “affective response” scenario, people use their positive feelings about a language as a cue to ascertain how they feel about the product, without regard to the message. With this theorizing, we would expect that all bicultural consumers would be positively inclined toward brands that use home-language words in their advertising. However, we argue

that for brands that have higher levels of host cultural symbolism, bilingual ads are not as effective.

2.2. Cultural symbolism

Building on the work of Torelli et al. (2010), we previously defined a brand's cultural symbolism as the perceived consensus of the degree to which the brand symbolizes the abstract image of a certain cultural group. According to the dynamic constructivist theory of culture (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000), cognitive representations of a culture or cultural schema evolve when people have some direct or indirect experiences with a certain culture. This cultural schema comprises a loose network of shared knowledge about a human group and includes both a central concept (e.g., American culture) and its associated beliefs, values, and objects (including brands and products). Cultural schemas can operate below consciousness and guide cognition only when it becomes accessible (Hong et al., 2000; Oyserman, 2009; Torelli & Ahluwalia, 2012).

Referred to as “consumption symbols” or cultural icons (McCracken, 1986), commercial brands can evoke distinct cultural schemas. For example, in a cued recall study, Torelli, Chiu, Keh, and Amaral (2009) show that European Americans who read a list of important and unimportant values (for American culture) recalled a greater number of culturally important values in a subsequent surprise recall task when cued with images of brands high (vs. low) in cultural symbolism. The effect occurred presumably because culturally symbolic brands automatically spread activation in the cultural knowledge network and thereby facilitated recall of culturally important values encountered earlier. The extent to which the brands used as retrieval cues symbolized American culture did not influence recall of culturally unimportant values. In the same study (Torelli et al., 2009), European Americans reminded of the positive qualities of the American identity had more favorable evaluations of brands that were symbolic of the American culture (e.g., Nike) but were indifferent to brands that were low in cultural symbolism (e.g., Dasani bottled water). Torelli et al. (2010) show that American participants rated American brands higher on individualist values, such as power and achievement, which are common in the United States.

We expect that the positive impact of bilingual ads on biculturals' brand attitudes is stronger for brands that are not culturally symbolic than for brands that are culturally symbolic. Among culturally symbolic brands, bilingual ads may be less effective because they may contradict or be perceived as inconsistent with the cultural associations of a brand that is strongly linked to one culture (i.e., host-culture symbolic brand). Therefore, there is less likelihood of enhancing consumers' perceptions of the culturally symbolic brand through bilingual advertising. In other words, because these culturally symbolic brands are strongly linked to one primary cultural identity, consumers may not perceive bilingual advertising involving a second, distinct cultural identity as compatible with their existing set of brand associations. Stated differently, consumers may evaluate bilingual ads as having lower perceived fit when paired with culturally symbolic brands. As a result, bilingual ads may not be very effective.

In contrast, in the case of less culturally symbolic brands, bilingual ads have the potential to enhance brand liking significantly, over and above advertising in the host language. Because the less symbolic brand is not tied to a specific culture, there is a potential for it to appeal to the dual identities of biculturals, via bilingual advertising.

Thus, in accordance with the compatibility-with-brand-symbolism argument, bilingual ads will elicit higher levels of brand liking compared to host language ads, but this will be evident only for less culturally symbolic brands. We design a series of studies to test these hypotheses, which are summarized below:

H1a. For brands low in cultural symbolism, ads featuring both the host and the home language and ads featuring the host language will have

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