

Standardization or Adaptation in International Advertising Strategies: The Roles of Brand Personality and Country-Of-Origin Image

Xuehua Wang

Shanghai University of Finance and Economics

Zhilin Yang

Victoria University of Wellington

Abstract

This study investigates the issue of standardization and adaptation in international advertising from a consumer perspective by focusing on two variables, i.e., brand personality and country-of-origin (hereafter COO). Results reveal that brand personality is positively related to a more adaptive approach by firms; whereas COO image is found to exert a positive influence on a more standardized approach by firms. Implications for research as well as for practice are discussed.

Keywords: Brand personality, Country-of-Origin, Standardization, Adaptation, International Advertising.

Introduction

The issue of international advertising standardization and adaptation has remained unresolved during the last several decades (Agrawal, 1995; Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos, 1997). International advertising standardization refers to utilizing the same or similar advertising messages across different countries or areas; international advertising adaptation is defined as using different advertising messages in separate markets (Kotler, 2008). However, there are no absolute international adaptation practices or advertising standardization across boundaries. Academics have gradually recognized the importance of a contingency approach, which argues that the best advertising strategy needs to be carefully determined depending on an analysis of factors inherent in the particular situation or environment at hand (Buzzell, 1968; Miracle, 1968; Ryans, 1969). By answering this call, Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos (1997) have conceptually developed a framework to summarize the relevant factors that impact the choice of the appropriate international advertising strategies; these factors include local environmental determinants, firm environmental determinants, and intrinsic determinants. However, few studies focus on the influence of specific determinants pertaining to the extent of standardization or adaptation of international advertising strategies.

To address this gap, this study aims to investigate the issue of international advertising standardization and adaptation from a specific consumer profile perspective, specifically focusing on two factors, i.e., brand personality and COO effect, which are found to be significant in influencing consumer decision making (Wang and Yang, 2008).

Consumers purchase branded products not only for their functional benefits, but more importantly for the symbolic meanings embedded in products (Veryzer, 1995). Symbolic brand benefits refer to the signaling effects shown to others when consuming the brand (Keller, 1993). In addressing the symbolic meanings contained in products/brands, several important research areas emerge; among them are brand personality and COO image.

Brand personality denotes the phenomenon that a brand is frequently related to various human personality characteristics, such as fashion-consciousness, prestige, and being down-to-earth (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality has been found to be positively associated with consumer preferences, such as usage, loyalty, trust, feelings of comfort, and confidence in consumers' minds (Biel, 1993; Fournier, 1998; Sirgy, 1982). Therefore, brand personality is an important factor to consider when firms enter markets in different countries. However, it remains a question as to whether, or to what extent, a firm should standardize or adapt its international advertising strategy when its brand personality is strongly/weakly perceived by local consumers (Barich and Philip, 1991; Wang, Yang, and Liu, 2009). Empirical evidence is also lacking as to how brand personality affects a firm's international advertising standardization and adaptation strategies. In addition, it is found that the advertisements of each country ideally display a certain degree of sensitivity to the brand personality characteristics of the specific local market (Mueller, 1987). It may be expected that the stronger the local brand personality characteristics, the more adaptive to local culture the international advertising strategy tends to be. Therefore, the first objective of this study is to investigate the impact of brand personality on international advertising strategies.

Country-of-origin refers to the country with which a manufacturer's product is associated (Saeed, 1994). COO image describes the stereotypic perception that consumers hold toward the country's representative products or brands (Nagashima, 1970; Roth and Romeo, 1992). Prior relevant literature finds that consumers vary in their evaluation of products/brands from different countries; hence, these variations influence their attitudes and purchase intention toward the products/brands (Roth and Romeo, 1992; Schooler, 1965; Yasin et al., 2007). This COO concept can help international advertising managers to understand, in considerable detail, the target market so as to develop more effective advertising messages (Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos, 1997). In addition, it is difficult for consumers to change this stereotypic COO image perception regarding a specific product/brand from a particular country; thus, firms ought to make full use of these COO image stereotypes, instead of trying to change them dramatically (Roth and Romeo, 1992; Wang and Yang, 2008). Therefore, it may be suggested that COO image could exert a positive influence on international advertising standardization. However, it lacks empirical evidence as to how COO image influences the extent of international advertising standardization and adaptation; thus, the second objective of this study is to examine the relationship between COO image and the extent of international advertising standardization and adaptation.

Given the foregoing, the objectives of this study are to examine the influences of brand

personality and COO image on the extent of standardization and adaptation in international advertising strategies, respectively. Subsequently, we will review and elaborate on relevant conceptual background, and then, further develop research hypotheses.

Conceptual Background and Hypotheses Development

Standardization and Adaptation of International Advertising

When going international, firms must consider different degrees of two types of advertising strategies, i.e., standardization and adaptation. This topic has attracted enormous attention during the last several decades (e.g., Buzell, 1968; Ghoshal, 1987; Levitt, 1983; Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos, 1997; Solberg, 2001). Standardization of international advertising strategy is defined as utilizing the same, or common, advertising messages on an international basis, since the worldwide marketplace has become increasingly homogeneous, to the extent that international firms can market standardized products/services all over the world through identical advertising strategies, principally due to such influences as TV, movies, and the Internet (Jain, 1989). The rationale behind this position is that consumers in different countries or areas share the same, or very similar, wants and needs; therefore, they can be persuaded by universal advertising appeals (Buzell, 1968; Fatt, 1967; Killough, 1978; Levitt, 1983). Such an international advertising strategy can result in substantial media and production cost savings, because the multinational company needs only to develop a common advertising campaign across world markets.

By contrast, adaptation of an international advertising strategy suggests that each market must be considered, for the most part, as a distinctly separate unit and adaptations must be made accordingly (Pratt, 1956, p.172) due to differences in culture, economic status, legal conditions, and foreign market media. In the 1960s, academicians gradually shifted towards the contingency approach when using international advertising, indicating that whether to standardize or not is not a dichotomous decision, and that there are various degrees of international advertising standardization and adaptation, depending on analysis of the factors relating to the particular situation or environment at hand (Buzzell, 1968; Miracle, 1968; Ryans, 1969).

Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos (1997) develop a conceptual framework to capture the related factors that impact the degrees of adaptation or standardization in international advertising. One of the most important determinants is consumer profile, which encompasses the demographic, psychographic, and behavioral characteristics of consumers in the host country (Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos, 1997). However, relatively few articles deal with the influence of consumer-related characteristics on the degree of standardization or adaptation in international advertising strategy; thus, this study intends to contribute new insights in this area by addressing two related influential factors in consumer decision making, i.e., brand personality and COO image.

Brand Personality

Aaker (1997) defines brand personality as the human traits associated with a specific brand; Sweeney and Brandon (2006) further consider this concept from the perspective of interpersonal relationship with the brand and regard brand personality as those human characteristics corresponding to the interpersonal relationship that are relevant to depicting the brand as a relationship partner. Consumers imbue different brands with different brand personalities. For

instance, consumers may portray the brand of Levi's as a brave, modern, and swaggering young man; while the brand of Coca-Cola may be personalized as a more traditional, family-oriented, and conservative man. Brand personality relates to the symbolic values possessed by a brand (Keller, 2003). Through association of brands with human personality characteristics and by consuming the brands, consumers can enhance their self-concept (Belk et al., 1982).

Consumers in different cultures tend to prefer different brand personality characteristics. For instance, in Eastern countries, the traditional brand traits such as family, down-to-earth, and friends are more generally preferred; whereas in Western countries, consumers may attach more value to such brand personality characteristics such as individualism, creativity, and risk-taking. At the same time, as globalization intensifies, more and more people in different cultures share certain similar or common brand traits, such as prestige and social status. Thus, an important task for international advertising managers is to decide the degree of standardization and adaptation of international advertising when extending their campaigns to different cultures. In practice, the advertisements of each country ideally display a certain degree of sensitivity to the cultural uniqueness and to the brand personality characteristics of the specific local market (Mueller, 1987). Thus, the stronger the local brand personality characteristics, the more adaptive to local culture the international advertising strategy tends to be. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H1: Local brand personality strength tends to be positively related to the degree of adaptation of international advertising strategies.

COO Image

COO image is important in affecting consumers' perceptions toward products/brands from a given country (Johansson, Douglas, and Nonaka, 1982; Saeed, 1994; Ahmed, Johnson, and Boon, 2004), and can further influence purchase intention (Roth and Romeo, 1992; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 1993). Hong and Wyer (1989) find that COO image is positively related to consumers' product quality evaluations. Thus, if a country possesses a positive image on particular product category dimensions important for product classification and evaluation, then consumers would hold favorable attitudes toward products of this category from that country (Roth and Romeo, 1992). For instance, when talking about fashionable clothing, people would think favorably of brands originating in Italy.

The COO image concept can help international advertising managers to understand more thoroughly their target market and thus develop a more suitable advertising program for the local market. For instance, Germany is famous for making cars and also enjoys a good reputation throughout the world. Thus, a joint venture company in China, collaborating with its German partner, can make good use of the particular and positive COO image of Germany, and thus develop advertising messages specifically emphasizing such a COO image. An important characteristic of COO image is that it represents a stereotypic perception toward a specific kind of product or brand manufactured in, or originating from, a particular country (Lin and Chen, 2006). It is not easy for consumers to change this stereotypic COO image perception in the short term; thus, companies should utilize these image stereotypes, instead of trying to change them dramatically (Roth and Romeo, 1992). Hence, the stronger the COO image is, the more standardized the international advertising strategy tends to be when using COO-related ad messages. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2: COO image tends to be positively related to the extent of standardization of international advertising strategy.

Research Methodology

Questionnaire and Measures

The questionnaire included two sections. The first section measured three factors (Brand personality, COO image, the perceived extent of standardization in international advertising); the second part recorded respondent demographic information. The questionnaire was originally in English; then it was translated and back-translated into Chinese until acceptable translation accuracy was achieved.

Brand personality was measured by adapting Aaker (1997)'s five-dimensional scale, including sincerity (inclusive of down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, and cheerful), excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, and up-to-date), competence (reliable, intelligent, and successful), sophistication (upper class and charming) and ruggedness (outdoorsy and tough) on a 7-point scale with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .92. Based upon Table I, the correlation coefficients for the four components of brand personality (i.e., sincerity, excitement, competence, and sophistication) were in the range of 0.69 to 0.74, which were all significant at the $p < .01$ level. In addition, each of the four components was highly correlated with the overall scale of brand personality (.80 or above).

Table I: Correlations among the Four Components of Brand Personality

	Sincerity	Excitement	Competence	Sophistication	Brand personality
Sincerity	1.000				
Excitement	.69*	1.000			
Competence	.72*	.70*	1.000		
Sophistication	.74*	.71*	.72*	1.000	
Brand personality	.89*	.87*	.85*	.80*	1.000

Note: *Statistically significant at $p < .01$ level.

Roth and Romeo (1992)'s scale was adapted to measure COO image. It includes four dimensions: innovativeness (using new technology and engineering development level), design (appearance and style), prestige (status and reputation), and workmanship (reliability, durability, craftsmanship, and quality). Nine items with anchors ranging from 1 "absolutely disagree" to 7 "absolutely agree", with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .91, were used for measurement. Results presented in Table II showed that correlations among the four components of COO image ranged from 0.51 to 0.63 and all were statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level. Each component was highly correlated with the overall measure of COO image (.77 or above).

Table II: Correlations among the Four Components of COO Image

	Innovativeness	Design	Prestige	Workmanship	COO image
Innovativeness	1.000				
Design	.51*	1.000			
Prestige	.52*	.59*	1.000		
Workmanship	.61*	.63*	.57*	1.000	
COO image	.78*	.81*	.77*	.89*	1.000

Note: *Statistically significant at $p < .01$ level.

We used a subjective measure for the perceived extent of standardization and adaptation of international advertising, such as the communication platform, creative idea, or concept (Solberg, 2002; van Raaij, 1997). The concept was captured by using five items including “To what extent do you consider that the advertising of the brand is standardized in terms of (1) its selling argument; (2) its main idea; (3) its text; (4) its endorsers; and (5) its product associations” with a Cronbach’s coefficient alpha of 0.88. The final pool of measurement items was determined by soliciting suggestions from experts in this field.

Finally, all measures were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to check validity issues. The CFA allows for a validity evaluation of the measures used. The fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 1.92$, $p = .000$, goodness-of-fit index [GFI] = .91, adjusted goodness-of-fit index [AGFI] = .90, confirmatory fit index [CFI] = .95, normed fit index [NFI] = .93, root mean squared error of approximation [RMSEA] = .04) suggest a good fit of the measurement model. All items loaded significantly (critical ratio [CR] > 1.96) on their corresponding constructs. Therefore, evidence of trait validity is provided for the dependent measures (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

Sample and Data

College students in Macau were recruited as our sample respondents. First they were required to watch two TV editions of four brands in four product categories (i.e., beer, cola, razors, and clothes); these brands were Budweiser for beer, Coca-Cola for cola, Gillette for razors, and Levi’s for clothes, which were all familiar to youngsters in China. The two TV editions for each brand were from the U.S. and mainland China, respectively. There were two reasons that we use students in Macau to watch ads from U.S. and mainland China. First, Macau is adjacent to Mainland China and has been greatly influenced by Mainland China’s consumption culture, since it is a tiny place with limited resources. Thus, the cultural difference between Macau and mainland China is relatively small. Second, most of the university students that we sampled were from the Chinese mainland (72.9%). Subsequently, each student in the sample was asked to complete the questionnaire based upon his/her understanding of these different ads. Three hundred and fifty six questionnaires were distributed. Two hundred and sixty one usable questionnaires were finally collected with a response rate of 73.3%. There were 145 female (55.6%) and 116 male respondents (44.4%). Ages of respondents were primarily between 20 and 23 years old (92.7%).

Results

Regression analysis was used to test the two hypotheses, after controlling for gender and age. Gender was dummied in the regression analysis. It was hypothesized by H1 that brand personality would be positively related to the extent of adaptation of international advertising strategy. According to Table III, regression results indicated that brand personality produced a significant and positive standardized coefficient (.21) on the extent of adaptation of international advertising strategy, thus supporting H1.

Table III: Hierarchical Regression Analysis Results (DV: The Extent of Ad Adaptation)

Explanatory Variables	Beer	Cola	Razors	Clothes
Gender	.11*	.03	.09*	.08*
Age	.05	.04	.02	.03
Brand personality	.12*	.07*	.25*	.15*
COO image	-.10*	-.09*	-.29*	-.11*
Constant	3.22	2.71	2.94	3.76
<i>F</i>	11.43 (<i>p</i> < .001)	9.05 (<i>p</i> < .001)	17.82 (<i>p</i> < .001)	14.13 (<i>p</i> < .001)
<i>R</i> ²	.21	.14	.30	.23
Overall model <i>p</i> value	.000	.000	.000	.000

Note: * *p* < .01.

H2 predicted that COO image would exert a negative influence on the extent of adaptation of international advertising strategy. Based on models 2 and 3 in Table III, regression results revealed that COO image was negatively and significantly related to the extent of adaption in international advertising with a standardized coefficient of -0.27. Therefore, H2 was supported.

We also split the database based on the four product categories (see Table IV). We found that the cola product category produced less significant results than other three categories. Specifically, for the cola sample, the standardized regression coefficients for brand personality and COO image were 0.07 and -0.09, respectively. In contrast, the razor product category generated stronger significant results than other three product categories. Specifically, the standardized regression coefficients for brand personality and COO image were 0.25 and -0.29, respectively for the razor sample. This finding indicated that the effectiveness or impact of brand personality and COO image on the extent of adaptation of international advertising may depend on product categories.

**Table IV: Standardized Regression Coefficients across Different Product Categories
(DV: The Extent of Ad Adaptation)**

Explanatory Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender	√	√	√
Age	√	√	√
Brand personality		√; (.21) ¹ ; (.27) ²	√; (.20) ¹ ; (.25) ²
COO image			√; (-.27) ¹ ; (-.29) ²
Constant	2.19	2.98	3.86
<i>F</i>	7.81 (<i>p</i> < .001)	12.79 (<i>p</i> < .001)	14.95 (<i>p</i> < .001)
<i>R</i> ²	.12	.25	.29
<i>R</i> ² change	.12	.13	.04
Adj- <i>R</i> ²	.10	.23	.27
Overall model <i>p</i> value	.000	.000	.000

Notes: ¹ is the standardized regression coefficient; ² is the unstandardized regression coefficient.

Discussion

This study investigates the relationship between brand personality, COO image and the extent of standardization vs. adaptation in international advertising strategy, which no prior studies have explored empirically. Results reveal that the stronger the brand personality, the more adaptive the international advertising is to local consumer needs and wants; COO image is found to be negatively related to the extent of adaptation of international advertising due to its stereotypic characteristic. Implications for research as well as for practice will be discussed.

The stronger the brand personality, the stronger the extent of adaptation of international advertising tends to be. Different consumer segments across the world attach different personality characteristics to the same object. For instance, the color of red is associated with active, hot or enthusiastic in Asian countries; in contrast, red is poorly received in African countries. Thus, in line with this prior relevant research, this study finds that advertising messages have to be adapted to local brand personality perceptions to achieve higher acceptance rate (Melewar and Vemmervik, 2004).

COO image is found to be negatively related to the extent of adaptation in international advertising. COO image represents the stereotypic perception that consumers hold toward the country's typical products/brands (Roth and Romeo, 1992; Bluemelhuber et al., 2007). One important role played by COO image is called the halo effect (Han, 1989). That is, when consumers are not familiar with a product/ brand, they rely primarily on the halo effect to infer product/brand attributes, thus affecting their product/brand attitudes. Moreover, it is not easy to change COO image of a particular country toward its representative products/brands in the short term; thus, because of this COO image characteristic, multinational companies need to use a high extent of standardization in their international advertising strategy to optimize COO advertising appeal.

Another finding is that the cola sample generated less significant results than the other three product categories for brand personality and COO image. This may be due to the fact that Coca Cola has enjoyed a unified brand image and comparatively similar brand personality characteristics across the world. Thus, the effect of brand personality and COO image for cola was not so evident as for the other three product categories. In addition, we also found that the razor sample generated more significant standardized regression coefficients than the other three product categories. The razor advertisement of the US version featured male-female intimacy and the endorsers were foreigners; whereas the China version was related to friends and work scenarios and the endorsers were Chinese. After students watched the two ads, they were required to imagine that the two endorsers in the US version were replaced by Chinese; some students responded that such an intimate advertising scenario would make them feel uneasy, which may be due to the cultural differences between Eastern and Western values. Our findings also tell us that the effect of consumer profile variables may be dependent on advertising campaigns and product categories.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study can also be helpful for multinational companies in dealing with the issue of the extent of standardization and adaptation in international advertising. First, quality survey research on local consumer attitudes toward brands can help international advertising managers understand, in considerable depth, the various brand personality associations in different countries or areas, which further assist the development of local advertising programs.

Second, in designing advertising messages that emphasize the COO image of a specific brand, international companies can, to a greater extent, standardize their advertising campaigns across world markets so as to save media and advertising costs.

Third, the effects of brand personality and COO image may vary across different advertising appeals and product categories. Thus, multinational companies need to gain insights into each product/brand category and conduct research on different advertising campaigns in order to determine the extent of standardization or adaptation in their advertising strategy.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of this study, as well as directions for future research, need to be noted. We did not consider brand familiarity or brand involvement as control variables, which may influence the quality of our results. Some students may already hold favorable or unfavorable views toward the brands investigated. Future research should reduce this sample bias to achieve more generalizable results.

In addition, college students were used as our sample respondents, which may limit the generalizability of our results. For future research, it is desirable to recruit more diverse consumer segments in order to produce more insightful results. Another direction for future studies is to take product categories into consideration, since the effects of brand personality and COO image depend on product categories.

Finally, we recognize that there are other variables that can influence the extent of standardization and adaptation of international advertising, such as self-concept, personality-related constructs, and consumption patterns in different cultures; thus, future studies need to incorporate these as well as other factors to capture a more complete picture of this phenomenon.

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