Appealing to the International Consumer: Some Considerations for Broadening the Scope of International Advertising

Introduction
The potential wealth of information for the fields of cultural, consumer and management theory and practice that may be derived from international advertising research has stimulated a plethora of studies over the past few decades (Hackley, 2005). The continued growth in advertising expenditures internationally (Lee & Carter, 2005) indicates that this remains a pertinent area of study, especially in light of the opportunities (and decision-making complexities) afforded by new media channels to transmit brand messages. However, the development of this stream of research has also provoked criticism for its fragmented nature and subsequent lack of theory development (Okazaki, Mueller & Taylor, 2010; Taylor, 2006). Therefore, this paper seeks to identify some of the key issues in the design of international advertising studies, in order to contribute to the development of a more robust body of research with practitioner application value.

The construct of the ‘advertising appeal’ has long been recognized as the means by which the marketer endeavours to communicate the product/brand message (Dichter, 1949; Karp 1974; Labarbera, Weingard & Yorkston, 1998), whether that is for the selling of physical products/services (Ogilvy, 1983), or the creation of awareness of a brand image or organization (Mikhailitchenko, Javalgi, Mikhailitchenko and Laroche, 2009). Many studies have sought to examine the type(s) of advertising appeal(s) selected by marketers to reinforce brand positioning across assorted markets. The inherent complexity in the definition of the construct of advertising appeals (Okazaki et al., 2010) has motivated researchers to focus on comparative studies of the use of specific appeals across different international markets (e.g. Nevett, 1992; So, 2004; Teng & Laroche, 2006). We contend, however, that it is the ambiguity associated with the definition of the construct of advertising appeals that has contributed to the fragmented approach in the field.

Implicit in the increasing internationalization of businesses is the growing need on the part of marketing managers to find ways and means to communicate effectively with people from a wide spectrum of cultures, while maintaining an internationally consistent brand image. The added dimension of culture within international studies has compounded the complexity in international advertising research, where issues of culture, language and linguistic nuances in the interpretation of the advertising materials also need to be factored into the evaluation of the appropriateness and effectiveness, of the selected appeal. But, as Zandpour et al. (1994: p.311) highlight, “there are few guidelines to assist practitioners in discriminating between advertising which is ‘culturally fit’ and that which is not”.

This paper posits that it is the lack of a comprehensive definition of the core construct at the root of the maligned fragmentation (Okazaki et al., 2010; Taylor 2006). Moreover, the level of the moderating effect of multiple environmental factors on the choice of and response to an advertising appeal, as well as the degree to which the factors are underpinned by the cultural environment in which they are embedded, constitutes a significant gap in extant international advertising research. Following a critical evaluation of the current status of research in the field, this paper proposes a number of future research directions with the intent of redressing the shortcomings in the extant wealth of studies, in order to support theoretical development and the creation of an overarching framework with which to guide practitioners’ decision-making.

Defining the Scope and Purpose of an Advertising Appeal
Although scholars have spent over half a century studying and discussing advertising appeals, it would seem that a consensus has still not been reached with regard to the definition and the parameters of the functions of appeals (Okazaki et al., 2010). The definition of an appeal
needs to resolve the ambiguity that arises due to its use interchangeably with terms like drive, claim, and theme, as well as some debate as to whether an appeal should be treated as a message element or a response element in its definition.

Particularly pertinent to international advertising research, a number of definitions have emerged that focus on the role of the advertisement in stimulating a response or action on the part of the 'spectator'. When the spectators come from different cultures, the specificity and the meanings assigned to similar messages can be very different (Lee, Williams & La Ferle, 2004) and the kind of response achieved may be different to that originally intended by the advertiser, depending on who views the advertisement (Beetles & Harris, 2005).

**Theoretical Considerations in the International Advertising Environment**

Based on the underlying premise that advertising is in fact a sales tool (Naccarato & Neendorf, 1998; Ogilvy, 1983) and deployed to stimulate a response by the recipient of the advertising message (Beetles & Harris, 2005; Kotler & Armstrong, 1991), many of the proposed definitions have focused on consumer motivation. Subsequently, many studies have drawn upon the behavioral psychology literature for their theoretical foundations. Clearly if an appeal is considered to be a response variable, or an intended response, an understanding of the behavior of the consumer is imperative, justifying the use of behavioural theories.

It is suggested in the literature that sometimes the messages that are sent are not necessarily the messages that are received (Baudot, 1991; Hackley, 2005), thus inferring that the advertiser requires an in-depth knowledge and comprehension of the target audience. Accordingly, studies based on personality theories have drawn from the basic personality types defined by Carl Jung (1923/1971) as the focus of their investigation. The subsequent conclusions from such studies suggest that advertisements are more effective if the appeals are consistent with the information processing styles of the intended audience (Labarbera et al., 1998). Aaker and Williams (1998) caution that inadequate attentiveness to the thinking and perceiving processes of the different audiences, as well as the differentiated needs and wants, may result in the miscommunication of the intended message.

**Cultural Dimensions Affecting the Choice of Appeals in International Advertising**

A critical dilemma facing managers of global brands is how to treat the core brand message across multi-cultural markets. This has stimulated extensive research into the extent of standardization versus adaptation in advertising (e.g. Hite & Fraser, 1988; Kanso & Nelson, 2002; Nelson & Paek, 2007; Zandpour et al., 1994; Zou, 2005). The proposition that message appeals and advertising strategies tailored to individual cultures are more effective is substantiated in the literature (Rutigliano, 1986), despite the persuasive pull of cost efficiencies, brand control and the exploitation of good ideas, in the argument for a standardized approach (Kanso & Nelson, 2006). The asserted fact that a multiplicity of context-specific global cultures may exist (Featherstone, 1990; Hannerz, 1989; Lee, Williams & La Ferle, 2004) exacerbates rather than removes the practical problems of intercultural communication (Gessner & Schade, 1990).

While personality or needs theories are useful in explaining the response to messages at a psychological or physiological level of an individual, they may be insufficient in providing the theoretical foundations for specific appeals in some cases. For example, numerous studies suggest that cross-cultural differences exist in response to advertisements (e.g. Lass & Hart, 2004; Mueller, 1987; Nevett, 1992; Teng & Laroche, 2006; Vincent & Dubinsky, 2004; Wang, 2000) and have sought to clarify the degree to which cultural differences affect the reception of the brand message. In explaining these differences, group level theories and concepts, such as national character and cultural values, are usually factored into the broad definition of what constitutes an advertising appeal.

In a review of the research on cross-cultural advertising, Okazaki and Mueller (2007) found that the majority of studies responded to Zinkhan’s (1994) suggestion to frame their research
on Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions (e.g. Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; de Mooij, 1999; Mortimer & Grierson, 2010). Jung & Kellaris (2004) related the purchase intents to the message appeal used in various cultures and established that elements of culture, such as a tendency towards uncertainty-avoidance or collectivism, moderate this relationship, thus confirming that culture seems to have an important effect on the persuasive capacity of message appeals. Although using different classification labels, Mueller’s (1987) study of Japanese versus American advertisements also concurs with the differentiation between collectivist and individualistic oriented societies outlined by Hofstede (1980), and found many associated culture-specific differences. However, Mortimer and Grierson’s (2010) comparative study of French and British advertising suggests that a moderating factor should be applied, as the authors’ study revealed that differences in the type of advertising appeal were only observed where there is a clear differentiation between the two nations in the corresponding cultural dimension (in this case, uncertainty-avoidance).

The complexities of cultural identity dictate that marketers should be wary of clustering nations in regions to gain standardization benefits (Fink, Neyer & Kolling 2007). The study by Javalgi, Cutler and White (1994) on the use and frequency of status and quality appeals in print advertising in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea refuted the existence of regional standardization, at least with regard to these specific countries in the Pacific Basin. Similarly, somewhat contradictory evidence of the impact of cultural differences on the use of emotional appeals was found in So’s (2004) study comparing women’s magazine print advertisements in Hong Kong and Australia. The Hong Kong ads were found to use more rational appeals than the Australian ads, however, the sex appeal (emotional) was more often used in Hong Kong than Australia. The results were contrary to the expectations of the author, who anticipated that a collectivist society such as China would have members with greater emotional dependence than would be expected in an individualistic society such as Australia. This suggests that cultures are themselves influenced by the appeals used in advertising and lends support to propositions that cultural change can itself be directed (Deshpande, Farley & Webster, 1993; Ha, Karande & Singhapakdi, 2003). So’s (2004) study also cautions against drawing assumptions on national cultures without an understanding of the history and cultural heritage of sub-groups within the nation-state boundaries (Gefen & Heart 2006; Prime, Obadia & Vida 2009).

Furthermore, the scope of Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions, based on work-related values is limited in its propensity to explain the influence of culture on advertising. The integration of de Mooij’s (1999) discussion on paradoxical consumer values (the conflict between what is “desirable” according to social norms and what is “desired” as reflected in purchase choices) may provide a broader explanation and/or assessment of the critical moderating factors that determine the most appropriate appeal with which to invoke the desired consumer response.

Terlutter, Diehl, and Mueller (2006) argue that Schwartz’s (1999) typology of cultural values (seven dimensions) and the nine cultural dimensions identified in the more recent GLOBE study (House et al. 2004) – which build upon Hofstede’s (1980) earlier dimensions - provide a more appropriate platform for international marketing and advertising research (despite sample size limitations). This has yet to be validated empirically beyond Terlutter, Diehl, and Mueller’s (2006) preliminary examination of the assertiveness dimension across four countries, but constitutes an interesting potential stream of research for more robust investigations into international advertising (Taylor, 2006; Okazaki & Mueller, 2007).

**Other Factors Affecting the Choice of Appeals in International Advertising**

In addition to culture, a number of other factors that are relevant in cross-cultural advertising have been identified as affecting the choice of appeals used in advertising messages (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Griffith, Chandra & Ryans, 2003). Although space restrictions do not permit
a detailed analysis of the multitude of factors affecting audience responses, some key findings from previous studies warrant consideration for incorporating in future studies. For instance, it has been suggested in the literature that where a product or service addresses a consumer need versus a consumer want, the rational appeal tends to be more effective than an emotional one (Baudot, 1991). It is also important to keep in mind that, depending on the stage of development of a country, what is considered a need in one country may be a want in a less developed country (Mikhailitchenko et al., 2009).

A number of other country specific factors are also found to have implications on the choice as well as the potential effectiveness of the appeal (Craig & Douglas, 2006):

**Stage in the product lifecycle:** Lee and Carter (2005) suggest that the lifecycle stages of the service or products influences the positioning strategy, compounding the dilemma of the standardization decision for multinational companies expanding their product portfolio across different regional locations at different stages of their lifecycle.

**Stage of evolution of the market:** Chandy, Tellis, MacInnis and Thaiavanich (2001) posited that the same advertising cues can have very different effects on behaviour depending on the level of maturity of the market. The authors found that the effectiveness of appeals differs according to whether a market is relatively young or well established.

**Product features desired:** The advertisements for product categories depend on rational or emotional appeals related to the desired or preferred aspects of the products, which may vary based on the country specific conditions. For example, the premium car manufacturer BMW focuses on the appeal of a high-tech navigation system (rational/informational) in European markets and on (emotional) status appeals in Asian markets (McDowell 2002).

**Level of involvement with product/service:** While product involvement has long been acknowledged as a key factor in consumer behaviour, Mueller (1987) argues that the moderating factor of cultural values must also be brought into consideration when selecting the most appropriate appeal.

The level of the moderating effect of each of the above factors on the choice of and response to an advertising appeal, and the degree of interaction between them, constitutes a further gap in the research. A recent study by Oyedele, Minor and Ghanem (2009) uncovers ‘global’ advertising appeals across various sub-Saharan markets that are not impacted by the varying stages of development of the studied markets, indicating that further research is needed in this area before generalized assumptions can be made.

**Directions for Future Research**

Given the dramatic growth rates for advertising communications across many significant economies of the world over the past few decades (Lee and Carter, 2005), future research must respond to the information needs of practitioners to assist them in making various choices related to the development of effective advertising (Taylor, 2006), which is grounded in the appeal deployed to engage the recipient with the communication elements.

As has been illustrated in this paper, the literature on advertising appeals suggests that various cultural as well as other factors, including the type of product, the stage of product life cycle, stage of country evolution, etc., all have to be taken into consideration when choosing a message appeal in cross-cultural advertising, and it is beholden to the marketer to uncover all the necessary information pertaining to the situation (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Griffith, Chandra & Ryans, 2003). In light of current trends such as the increasing integration of the global environment, the growth of the Internet, as well as the worldwide growth of affluent well-travelled consumers and increased ethnic diasporas, it may be important for companies to maintain global visibility (Banerjee, 2000; Lee & Carter, 2005) in their cross-cultural communications. Hence, the impact of these trends on the choice of message appeals requires further research attention.
The concepts of cultural borrowing, cultural pluralism and cultural adaptation have been much discussed in the literature (e.g. Alden, Steenkamp & Batra, 1999; Craig & Douglas, 2006; Moriarty & Duncan, 1991; Smith, 1990), however, the potential role of marketers to act as drivers of cultural change through brand positioning and communication activities, warrants further attention. In Mueller’s (1987) comparative study of Japanese versus American advertisements, some unexpected results were found regarding the group consensus appeals. Mueller (1987) attributes this to the fact that as economies interact ever more frequently, the use of appeals and marketing practices in general may have an impact on cultures that may adopt values from other cultures. A number of other studies also recorded behavioural changes by the protagonists according to cross-cultural exposure (Das, Dharwadkar & Brandes, 2008; Deshpande, Farley & Webster, 1993; Tse, Francis & Walls, 1994). Research into the dynamics of cultural evolution would benefit from a longitudinal study into the power of global advertising appeals as a driver of cultural change, combined with a qualitative approach to probe the cultural nuances (Craig & Douglas, 2001).

In addition, the majority of comparative studies incorporate only a few markets in the analysis. Given the diverse opinions between standardization opportunities in both heterogeneous and homogeneous markets, the field would benefit from the inclusion of a greater spread of markets within and across geographic regions. Similarly, many studies are industry-specific and risk developing classification schemes that omit types of appeals unique to other industries and may be misleading for generalized practitioner use. As a result, the focus of the studies is frequently confined to one or two sub-topics within the area of investigation and the research is designed to answer a specific question. While this approach has yielded interesting results, a wider span of interacting elements and a grounded theory approach would contribute significantly to the field.

Due to a lack of longitudinal studies in the field regarding the effectiveness of advertising strategies, few studies have addressed the question of whether an increasingly globalized world is resulting in a convergence of modes and styles of communication used across cultures. Although the seminal study by Alden, Steenkamp and Batra (1999) stressed that cultural convergence was not an inevitable outcome of globalization, some studies have observed a move away from traditional advertising content in many Eastern societies as they experience growth and development (Wang, Jaw, Pinkerton & Morton, 1997). Taylor (2006) notes that although cultural dimensions are frequently presented as the rationale for differences in advertising strategies across multiple markets, the proposed cultural dimensions are rarely measured. This would in part account for some of the divergences to expected findings highlighted in this paper. In consideration of the dynamic cultural evolution in the current era of globalization and the suggested interplay of other moderating factors in the field of international advertising (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Griffith, Chandra & Ryans, 2003), the role of cultural dimensions in specific research studies warrants deeper investigation to validate their impact. In light of the limitations of Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions in explaining the influence of culture on advertising, it is recommended that such research also explores the role of cultural factors expounded by the works of de Mooij (1999), Schwartz (1999) and House et al. (2004).

The importance of a carefully constructed advertising campaign in building a long-term sustainable brand image, should not be underestimated. A more thorough exploration of the factors discussed in this paper may facilitate the development of a framework model, and thus serve to assist the decision-making process for the international marketing manager charged with selecting the most appropriate and effective appeals to be deployed in the multi-cultural advertising environment.
References


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