

A Comparison of Factual/Low Context versus Emotional/High Context Message Appeals: Persuading Chinese Smokers to ring the Chinese Quitline

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Abstract

This study does not support the notion developed from cross cultural advertising literature that members of a particular cultural group will prefer a particular message advertising appeal if it reflects values that are congruent to its culture. An experimental design is applied to examine whether emotional/ high context appeals (n=120) are more persuasive than factual/ low context appeals (n=124) among target groups from collectivist cultural backgrounds. Analysis of Chinese smokers' pre-and-post intentions to contact the Chinese Quitline after viewing print advertisements determined that there was no difference between the two ad groups' shift scores. The common use of direct translations of Australian mainstream campaigns for this culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) target group could be viewed as an acceptable practice.

Keywords: social communications and advertising, acculturation, adaptation, culture, customisation.

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Introduction

Australia is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) countries in the world with over 20 per cent of its population speaking a language other than English. Over the past 20 years, government policies have ensured that health services and health promotion campaigns are inclusive of the needs of CALD communities. However, reviews of CALD campaigns cannot clearly identify the characteristics of effective social marketing communications (Milat, Carroll, and Taylor, 2005). In Australia, message appeals targeting CALD communities are almost always direct translations of the English language mainstream campaign. Lack of resources and the large number of communities with diverse languages are the most common reasons cited by campaign developers to explain why direct translation and placement in CALD media has been common practice for national and state-wide campaigns aiming to reach CALD communities (Donovan and Henley, 2003). To gain funding for more tailored campaigns to specific CALD groups primary research is required to test more suitable appeals as proposed in academic literature. The majority of cross-cultural studies on message appeals (cf Cutler, Erdem and Javalgi, 1991; Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Mueller, 1987; Tansey, Hyman and Zinkham, 1990; Yoon and Cropp, 1999) have used content analyses to compare samples of advertisements from two or more countries. This descriptive technique is methodologically problematic (Taylor, 2002) as it can only determine how often a message appeal is used (what happens) and cannot explain the underlying reasons for the differences (why it happens). For this reason, the current study moves away from content analysis and uses an experimental design to test the relative effectiveness of message appeals.

This study seeks to extend the generalisability of the empirical results of cross-cultural advertising studies on the use of message appeals by matching message appeals to a particular cultural or CALD group in a specific health area. This study has chosen to apply these ideas to Chinese speakers in Australia to help promote tobacco cessation or quitting smoking. Despite Australia's success in reducing its daily consumption of tobacco by 17% in 2006 (Cancer Institute NSW 2006), there is growing documentation of identifiable subpopulations within Australia that have maintained high smoking rates. These subgroups include people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD) groups (Baker Ivers and Bowman, 2006). One of these CALD groups is comprised of smokers who speak Cantonese and/or Mandarin (Chinese smokers). In 2006, Chinese smokers reported a smoking rate of 23% for males and 6% for females which places them in the top five CALD groups with high smoking rates (NSW Health, 2006). Cantonese/Mandarin speakers account for the third and sixth highest number of new migrants in Australia (CRC 2001), making it imperative to utilise social marketing communication strategies with the greatest potential to address these smoking rates. The literature on CALD populations and smoking provides very little firm evidence on culturally bound variables that influence smoking in Australia (Edwards and MacMillan, 1990). However, some authors argue that high rates of smoking in CALD communities in Australia may possibly be attributed to the influence of acculturation in the initiation and maintenance of smoking (Rissel *et al.*, 2001), smoking being still an accepted social practice in some Asian cultures (Kent, 1985, Ling and Glantz, 2002) including China, and CALD communities not understanding mainstream anti-smoking messages.

Literature Review

Cultural values are the core of advertising messages and typical advertising messages endorse, glamorise and reflect these values (Pollay and Gallagher, 1990). This view is supported by empirical studies that have shown that advertisements reflecting elements of local cultural values are more persuasive than those that ignore them (Gregory and Munch, 1997; Marquez, 1975).

Collectivism refers to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestionable loyalty. In these cultures, individual identity is primarily defined in accordance with the group or social system. Group needs take priority to individual needs. Most collectivist cultures, including many Asian societies, are also characterised by having a "shame culture." This is particularly demonstrated in the use of expressions such as "loss of face." In this context, when someone has done something bad, this does not reflect on himself/herself as an individual but more importantly it is his/her group that feels responsible and feels shame for the action. In general, Chinese cultures, as characterised by cultures from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, are all characterised as being collectivist cultures while Australia, is characterised as having an individualistic culture (Hofstede, 1984). Communication that occurs in collectivist cultures is characterised as less explicit about the recommended behaviour or high context information (Hall and Hall, 1990), using an appeal to family or membership of a group (Triandis, 1995), using more emotional than factual appeals (Tai, 2004). The strongest relationship found in the literature on cultural dimensions appears to be the correlation between the level of information context and individualism-collectivism cultural dimensions. Hofstede (1984b) found that collectivistic cultures show more indirect (low level of information; high context–high use of symbols, emotion) as opposed to individualistic cultures which tend to have high levels of explicit information and direct communication. The combination of these cultural dimensions provides the basis of the selection of message appeals for testing the present study.

There are a number of terms found in the literature that have been used to describe appeals providing straightforward facts or information to consumers. Some of the common terms include information appeals (Aaker and Norris, 1982), thinking ads (Golden and Johnson, 1983) and rational appeals (Coulson, 1989). Factual message appeals are appeals based on information that can be supported through documentation (Puto and Wells, 1984). A factual message appeal was chosen as one of the primary appeals for testing based on the frequency of its use in health promotion/public health campaigns. This frequency of use reflects what appears to be a widely held value of "informed choice" in health promotion. Informed choice is defined as the principle of providing individuals with as much information on the health issue concerned and allowing them to make a decision based on available facts. The factual message appeal used in this study included explicit information and direction about the harmful effects of smoking—a style characteristic of messages pertinent to Low Context information (LC) cultures. LC refers to the level of detail of culturally-relevant information provided in a particular form of communication (Hall, 1973).

The other message appeal tested is an emotional/high context (HC) appeal selected for its appeal to collectivist societies. Emotional appeals (sometimes referred to as mood, feeling, transformational or image appeals) attempt to stir positive emotions such as joy or negative emotions such as guilt and fear. High context messages are messages where most, if not all

of the message is implicit and not direct. This cultural dimension has been found to have concepts transferable to verbal and nonverbal communication, direct versus indirect advertising and the use of symbols, context and facts and data (Mooij, 1998). The notion that this dimension might explain the difference in advertising styles of various cultures has been empirically supported by a number of cross-cultural advertising studies (Hong, Mudderrisoglu and Zinkham, 1987; Mueller, 1991; Yoon and Cropp, 1999).

Research Question and Hypotheses

This study seeks to discern the type of message appeal—factual/low context or emotional/high context—that will be most effective with Chinese smokers living in Australia to encourage them to phone the Chinese Quitline. In particular, this study tests the hypothesis that individuals from collectivist cultures will have more favourable attitudes towards advertisements that have features that characterise collectivist communication and thus be more persuasive in regards to behaviour change. It is hypothesised that advertisements with emotional appeals and high context information (E1) will be more persuasive (to ring the Chinese Quitline) than Factual advertisements with low context information (F1) for Chinese smokers, that is $H1 = E1 > F1$.

Method

Participants for the experiment were Chinese speaking smokers who attended an Australian tertiary education institution and attendees of the Chinese New Year celebrations in two areas of Sydney. An intercept survey was used to administer the experiment and included participants who had smoked a cigarette in the last six months at the time of the study. A total of 249 usable responses were obtained with 123 participants exposed to an emotional/ high context appeal print advertisement and 126 participants exposed to a factual/low context print advertisement. A pre-exposure questionnaire was given to participants to gather their pre-intention to ring the Chinese Quitline [cf Prochaska and Diclemente's (1986) stages of change], level of addiction measures [cf Fagerstrom's (1978) tolerance test questions], country of birth, gender, age, and level of acculturation (measured by length of residency in Australia, self-reported English language proficiency and level of consumption of Chinese media). Participants were then shown one of the two experimental advertisements. The factual print advertisement, designed to make the reader make informed decisions in a manner typical of “western cultures” (Hall, 1973), contained low context information and had explicit information on the dangers of smoking, statistics on death rates and recommended ringing the Chinese Quitline. The emotional print advertisement, designed to appeal to smokers from collectivist cultures, used high context information where the recommended behaviour was not explicit. The message was in the form of a letter that appealed to the reader's (smoker's) interdependent relationship with others: the family, family integrity or group well-being, and concern about other or support of family/society (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis *et al.*, 1988,). These advertisements were developed in English and translated into Chinese, following Brislin's (1991) guidelines to cross-cultural testing of communication to ensure equivalence of meaning. The post-exposure questionnaire contained measures of cognitive and affective reactions to the ad and post-exposure intention to ring the Quitline. During the time of the administration of the experiment, the Chinese Quitline was not advertised and therefore minimised previous attitudes toward the brand for all participants.

Results

Manipulation checks using chi-square analysis and analysis of variance were conducted to determine the degree of similarity of the experimental groups. The composition of the two experimental groups was found to be equivalent (at $p = .05$) for level of addiction, country of birth and level of acculturation. Pre-intention to ring the Chinese Quitline differed between the groups (see Table 1) as there were more participants in the factual advertisement group in the *Preparation* Stage of Change (planning to ring the Chinese Quitline in the next month) and more participants exposed to the emotional advertisement who were in the *Contemplation* stage (planning to ring the Chinese Quitline within 6 months) $\chi^2 = 8.65$ df, 2, 0.01 $p < .05$. For this reason intention shift scores were calculated for each participant. A numerical value was assigned to each stage of change (1 for *Pre-Contemplation* Stage, 2 for *Contemplation* Stage and 3 for *Preparation*) thus a cross tabulation shift score was determined by subtracting pre from post exposure numerical scores. Shift scores are shown in Table 2. Chi-square analysis of these shift scores revealed no significant difference between participants exposed to the factual versus the emotional advertisement ($\chi^2 = 0.77$ df 2, 0.68 $p > .05$). Thus, the hypothesis of this study, that is $H1 = E1 > F1$ is rejected.

Table 1 - Pre and (post) exposure measures for intention to ring the Chinese Quitline

Message appeal	<i>Pre-contemplation - 1</i> Not planning to ring in 6 months	<i>Contemplation - 2</i> Planning to ring in 6 months	<i>Preparation - 3</i> Planning to ring next month	Total
Factual (F1)	104 (96)	5 (20)	16 (9)	125
Emotional (E1)	96 (89)	16 (22)	8 (12)	120
Total	200 (185)	21 (42)	24 (21)	245

Table 2 – Overall shifts in intention

Message appeal	Overall negative shift in intention “-1”	No change in intention or “0”	Overall positive shift in intention “1”	Total
Factual (F1)	11	99	14	124
Emotional (E1)	6	97	17	120
Total	17	196	31	244

The experimental groups did not differ on their cognitive reactions (liked, emotional, believable, important, worth remembering, clear, relevant, informative) and only differed on the item “sad” among the affective measures obtained (sad, guilt, regret, upset, irritated), with the factual ad rated less “sad” (mean = 2.58) than the emotional ad (mean = 3.11) $F = 5.230$. Sig. 0.023.

Relevance of the Findings to Theory and Practice

The primary purpose of this study was to test the theoretical proposition that individuals would respond more favourably to advertising that reflects their cultural values. Thus, it was anticipated that a message appeal that reflected the importance of belonging to a group, using indirect high context information and an emotional appeal would be most effective in terms of persuading Chinese smokers to ring the Chinese Quitline. The overall findings of this

experimental study did not find any significant difference between the factual/low context versus emotional/high context appeals presented in the print advertisements.

Practically, this research can assist health promotion and social marketing practitioners in how to market messages targeting this CALD group of Chinese smokers. The study's main finding provides support for the current use of direct translation of mainstream factual or emotional campaigns as there was no difference in persuasiveness of the two message appeals tested

However, there are several constraints on the use of information that has been generated from this study. First, similar to what was determined in a study by Edell and Burke (1987), was that the factual appeal advertisement evoked not just rational responses but emotional responses as well. This implies that any advertisement, even if it focuses on one message appeal will elicit both cognitive and affective responses (Edell and Burke, 1987). In actual practice, there can be several appeals found in any particular piece of advertising, yet advertisers tend to choose one core value that resonates with a particular target audience as the underlying source of its choice of appeals (Wells, Burnett and Moriarty, 1995). Additionally, a common criticism of Hofstede's cultural dimensions is that they are simplistic and tend to put cultures (analysed at a societal level) into extremes or polarised dichotomies, for example a society was either individualistic or collectivist (Triandis, 1995). Despite this criticism, Hofstede's cultural dimensions appear to be the most frequently tested and validated framework for analysing cultural differences (Dorfman and Howell, 1988, Bhagat and McQuaid, 1982).

Undertaking post-experimental qualitative research could explore the self-efficacy reasons for the lack of positive shifts in intention to ring the Quitline and also provide some insight into the negative intention shifts which should be of concern to a social marketing manager promoting quitting smoking. Future research should consider using quota sampling versus convenience sampling.

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