

***Comparative Advertising In the Global Marketplace: The  
Effects of Cultural Orientation on Communication***

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**COMPARATIVE ADVERTISING IN THE GLOBAL MARKETPLACE: THE  
EFFECTS OF CULTURAL ORIENTATION ON COMMUNICATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research examined the efficacy of one type of communication strategy, comparative advertising, in communicating product superiority to consumers across different cultures. In individualist cultures such as the United States, comparative advertising that highlights the superiority of the target brand is seen as more effective. However, in collectivist cultures such as Thailand, comparative advertising that highlights the similarity between brands is more likely to be effective. In addition, comparative advertising was more believable for unfamiliar brands in individualist cultures whereas comparison for familiar brands was more believable in collectivist cultures.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent research in consumer behavior and cultural psychology has shown that consumers exhibit different behavioral patterns in responding to marketing stimuli across cultures (Aaker 2000; Aaker and Sengupta 2000; Aaker and Williams 1998). Cultural orientation or the extent to which consumers have different norms and values across cultures, has been identified as a major determinant of the differences in behavior across cultures (Han and Shavitt 1994). Cultural orientation has been shown to influence inter-group perceptions (Markus and Kitayama 1991), attribution styles (Morris and Peng 1994), and behavior patterns (Triandis 1989). However, relatively little research has examined the effects of cultural orientation on persuasion (Aaker and Williams 1998).

This research examines the efficacy of one type of persuasive appeal, comparative advertising, across cultures. Comparative advertising is widely used and researched in the United States (Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991; Zhang, Kardes, and Cronley 1999). MCI vs. AT&T, and Pepsi vs. Coke advertising are classic examples of this strategy. The FTC encourages substantiated comparisons since it is believed to provide the consumer with objective information and foster competition. Despite its effectiveness in the United States, several countries such as Thailand have either banned or have strictly regulated comparative advertising as a promotional tool (Douglas and Craig 2000).

We explore the premise that the cultural orientation (i.e., the extent to which consumers are individualist or collectivist) will determine the effectiveness of the different types of comparative advertising. Individualist cultures such as the United States

promote competition by comparison with other members of the group, thereby making comparisons based on superiority effective (e.g., Pepsi beats Coke in a taste test). However, countries like Japan and Thailand are collectivist cultures that foster competition by cooperation. Therefore, focusing on superiority will be culturally incompatible. In contrast, a comparison that highlights the similarity between brands (e.g., Dristan relieves as many cold symptoms as Sudafed) is more likely to be effective in collectivist cultures. An experiment was conducted in two countries (United States and Thailand) to explore the effect of cultural orientation on the relative effectiveness of superiority and similarity based comparison strategies. We also examine the process mechanisms that form the basis of persuasion across cultures. Finally, we identify product familiarity as a factor that systematically influences the believability of comparative advertising across cultures.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Cultural Orientation**

One major dimension of cultural orientation is the individualism-collectivism continuum. This view suggests that countries/cultures could be broadly classified into two types: individualist cultures and collectivist cultures (Triandis 1989). Individualist cultures are primarily Western European and the United States. These cultures are characterized by an expression of the self, comparison of others in relation to the self and

emphasis on separateness and self-identity. The self is used as the focal point of one's life. Collectivist cultures are primarily Asian and Middle Eastern countries. These cultures are characterized by an expression of self within the framework of the peer group, comparison and definition of self in relation to others and the emphasis is on connectedness and relationships. The peer group is the focal point of one's life. Collectivists do not appear to view themselves as better than others in their society and they do not want to stand out from the crowd. While in the United States it is believed that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease", in Japan, "the nail that stands out gets pounded down" (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

It is well known that cultural norms and values form the basis of advertising strategies in any culture. So, differing cultural values should systematically influence the content of advertising appeals and the subsequent responses from the consumers. In a recent research, Aaker and Williams (1998) showed that the persuasive effect of emotional appeals differed across cultures. For example, ego-focused appeals were more effective in China whereas other-focused appeals were more effective in the United States. Han and Shavitt (1994) also found systematic differences in advertising appeals across cultures. In Korea, advertising appeals that emphasized family benefits were more persuasive whereas in the United States, appeals that emphasized individual benefits were more persuasive.

Thus, there is some evidence to suggest that different types of persuasive appeals may be effective across cultures. In addition, individualism-collectivism framework may provide a useful theoretical framework for examining cultural differences in persuasion.

## Comparative Advertising

Comparative advertising has been extensively investigated in the marketing literature (Pechmann and Stewart 1990; Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991). While the effectiveness of comparative advertising is context specific, the prevailing view is that it benefits the consumers by providing relevant competitive information (Jain 1993). In a typical comparative advertising, the advertiser claims superiority over a leading competitor (identified or unidentified) based on how superior the advertised brand is on an important attribute. For example, in the Pepsi challenge, Pepsi highlights its superiority over Coke by stating that more people preferred Pepsi over Coke in a recent taste test. The underlying principle is to differentiate the advertised brand from competition by demonstrating that it has better performance characteristics.

Operationally, several comparison formats are used for communicating the claim such as direct comparisons, indirect comparisons or general superiority comparisons. For example, in the direct comparison strategy, the advertised brand may be explicitly compared with the comparison brand by stating that the latter is inferior on an important attribute (e.g., Pepsi vs. Coke taste test). In the indirect comparison, the competing brand will be referred to as the leading brand. A general comparison would be a statement such as the advertised brand has the best performance (Dröge 1989; Gorn and Weinberg 1984).

Research has shown that comparative advertising enhances persuasion by both association as well as differentiation (Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991). Several studies

have shown that comparative advertising primarily associates the advertised brand with the comparison brand by making their perceived similarity salient (e.g., Dröge and Darmon 1987). In contrast, Pechmann and Ratneshwar (1991) showed that direct comparisons are more likely to differentiate the advertised brand from comparison brand by lowering the perceptions of the comparison brand when the featured attribute was typical of the category and the advertised brand was familiar. It appears that when the direct comparative ad explicitly states that the comparison brand is relatively inferior on a typical attribute, it is more effective in lowering the perceptions of the comparison brand.

Past research also suggests that comparative advertising featuring an unfamiliar (vs. familiar) advertised brand is more believable (Dröge and Dorman 1987). The results are explained based on the categorization theory, which suggests that when consumers have prior beliefs about a brand, subsequent disconfirming information is less believable. If an advertised brand is familiar, this reasoning suggests that consumers have already classified the brand and subsequent attempts to “disconfirm” the previous beliefs will be less believable (vs. new belief formation). However, when the advertised brand is new or unfamiliar, the consumer has not previously categorized the brand. Hence, the superior comparison, assuming it is credible, is used as a basis to categorize the new brand as superior to the comparison brand (Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991).

Thus, two observations emerge from the review of the literature on comparative advertising. First, comparative advertising enhances persuasion either by highlighting perceived similarity or by making perceived differences salient. Second, product familiarity may systematically influence the believability of comparative claims.



## Cultural Orientation and Comparative Advertising

A review of the comparative advertising literature based on studies conducted in the United States suggests that most comparative advertising feature a *superiority* format, which can be direct or indirect (Dröge 1989; Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991). In other words, the typical format of the comparison is an attempt at differentiation based on superiority. Very few comparisons are based on *similarity* and highlight the attributes shared by the comparison brand and the advertised brand. For example, a statement such as “Kenmore vacuum cleaners perform as well as Hoover” that attempts to associate Kenmore vacuum cleaners with a leading competitor is relatively limited.

As noted earlier, if the persuasive impact of comparative advertising can follow a process of association based on similarity, then comparisons based on similarity should also be effective. However, it is likely that the similarity based comparisons may lead to an inference of the advertised brand as a “me too” product. It may be seen as one of the several good products in the category. This positioning may not be a productive strategy in individualist cultures. Individualist cultures value success in competition and to that extent a “me too” product may not be viewed as an attractive choice. Consumers would like to have the best and possess the winner rather than just another good brand. So, we suggest that even though, theoretically, similarity based comparisons may be effective in creating favorable associations with the comparison brand, they are not culturally

compatible in individualist cultures. Since advertising reflects cultural norms and values, comparisons based on similarity are not viewed favorably in individualist cultures.

In contrast, comparisons based on similarity should be culturally compatible in collectivist countries. As noted earlier, collectivist consumers value group membership and are averse to self-promotion at the expense of group harmony. They do not look favorably upon attempts by group members to differentiate themselves from other group members (Markus and Kitayama 1991). So, superiority based comparisons are not culturally compatible in collectivist cultures. However, comparisons based on similarity should be culturally acceptable as they promote associations based on perceived similarity and hence reflect the value system of collectivist cultures.

Familiarity may also be viewed differentially across cultures. Collectivist cultures value relationships and relationships are built over time. Collectivists are more concerned about past associations and long-term relationships. For example, consumers in Japan buy products from companies they trust and are very brand loyal. They are very unlikely to buy products from unknown and foreign companies (Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran 2000). In the social context, clear distinctions are made between in-group and out-group members. The interests of the in-group are given priority over out-group. To that extent, information related to familiar brands should receive more consideration and are more likely to be believed. Unfamiliar brands may be considered out-group members and to that extent are not easily trusted. Any comparison claims made by unfamiliar products (out-group), may not receive careful consideration and are not likely to be considered credible. In contrast, individualist cultures value performance. Familiarity per se may not

have any specific advantages. They are more likely to buy a product that is superior in quality regardless of whether they are manufactured by a well-known or a new manufacturer. In the context of comparative advertising, as noted earlier, claims related to unfamiliar brands are more believable since they have not been categorized previously (Dröge and Dorman 1987).

Based on the above discussion, the following conclusions emerge. First, cultural orientation is likely to influence whether consumers prefer a superiority or similarity strategy. Second, familiarity may be viewed differentially as a function of cultural orientation. In this research, it is suggested that cultural orientation will have differential effects on both the type of comparison (superior or similar) and the familiarity (familiar or unfamiliar) of the advertised brand.

## Hypotheses

Consistent with past research (e.g., Triandis 1989), it is proposed that consumers in individualist cultures will favorably evaluate comparisons based on superiority. As noted earlier, in individualist cultures, the focus is on the individual and the individual strives to be unique and superior in relation to other members of the group. So, comparisons that highlight superior point of difference of the target product are more likely to be appealing to the individualists. In contrast, collectivist cultures prefer excellence through promoting better group performance and participation and highlighting the perceived similarity among group members. So, comparisons based on

perceived similarity are more likely to be compatible with and further the individual's goal of achieving conformity with the group.

**H1a:** In an individualist culture like the United States, comparison that highlights superiority will be evaluated more favorably.

**H1b:** In collectivist cultures like Thailand, comparison that highlights similarity will be evaluated more favorably.

Research in the United States suggests that consumers are more likely to believe the superiority claim if the comparison brand was unfamiliar rather than familiar (Dröge and Dorman 1987). For example, superiority claims were found to be more effective for new product introductions. One rationale is that disconfirming information subsequent to categorization is less effective. In individualist cultures, the focus is on performance rather than relationships (Markus and Kitayama 1991), so even an unfamiliar brand can be rated better when its superiority is highlighted. Also, when consumers have been exposed to a product, they form individual opinions and these opinions are unlikely to change by an advertising claim to the contrary. This finding is also compatible with research that suggests that individualistic consumers assign more weight to their individual opinions (Aaker and Sengupta 2000). However, in collectivist cultures, an opposite effect is anticipated. Collectivist cultures are based on relationships and the members value familiarity. Hence, familiarity is likely to be valued highly in those cultures. Acceptance in a relationship is based on familiarity. To that extent, it is hypothesized that consumers are more likely to believe statements from familiar (vs. unfamiliar) brands.

**H2a:** In the United States, consumers are more likely to believe the advertising claim, if the advertised brand is unfamiliar (new product) rather than familiar.

**H2b:** In Thailand, consumers are more likely to believe the advertising claim, if the advertised brand is familiar rather than unfamiliar.

In order to understand the processes by which comparative advertising leads to attitude change, respondents' thoughts will be examined (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000). It is anticipated that favorable or unfavorable thoughts related to the type of comparison featured will mediate subsequent product evaluations. In conditions where the advertising execution is culturally compatible, more favorable thoughts or "support arguments" will be reported. However, under conditions where the advertising execution is culturally incompatible, more unfavorable thoughts or "counter arguments" will be generated.

**H3a:** In the United States, more support arguments (favorable thoughts) will be generated and they will mediate evaluations when the comparison is based on superiority.

**H3b:** In Thailand, more support arguments (favorable thoughts) will be generated and they will mediate evaluations when the comparison is based on similarity.

## **METHOD**

## Subjects

One hundred and ninety subjects (98 from the United States and 92 from Thailand) participated in this experiment as part of a course requirement. They were undergraduates enrolled in an introductory marketing class in the United States and in Thailand. They participated in small group sessions and were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (type of comparison: superiority or similarity) X 2 (familiarity: familiar or unfamiliar brand name) between subjects design and cultural orientation was operationalized as a measured variable.

## Procedure

The study was described as a “consumer product study.” The respondents were given a packet of materials that contained a mock-up ad and a questionnaire. They were told that the ad was a pre-print version. They were instructed to examine the booklet as if they would read a magazine. The respondents were blind to the objective of the study to control for demand artifacts. After examining the ad, subjects completed a series of responses indicating product evaluations, claim believability, and listed their thoughts. Finally, they completed several manipulation checks including a self-construal scale (Singelis 1994) and were debriefed. The materials used in Thailand were translated into Thai by a professional organization that used back translation to ensure reliability (Brislin

1986). The English version was first translated into Thai by a bilingual person. A second bilingual person translated the Thai version into English. Finally, the differences were resolved by discussion with a bilingual supervisor.

### Independent Variables

Cultural orientation. The data were collected in two countries, Thailand and the United States. Prior research suggests that people from Thailand (United States) have collectivist (individualist) orientation (Triandis 1989). A scale was used to measure the degree to which subjects varied on independent self-construal (i.e., individualism) and interdependent self-construal (i.e., collectivism; Singelis 1994).

Familiarity. Familiarity was operationalized by the choice of the advertised brand that was either new to the country (unfamiliar) or already available in the country. We used toothpaste as the product category. The target brand was named “Crystal” in the unfamiliar condition. In the familiar condition, “Colgate” was used as the target brand. The comparison brand was “Crest” in both the familiar and unfamiliar conditions in the United States and was “Close-up” in Thailand. Colgate and Crest (Close-up) were the two leading brands in the United States (Thailand). Specifically, Colgate was chosen based on the results of a pretest that suggested that subjects in both cultures were equally familiar with Colgate. We decided to use “Crest” as a comparison brand in the United States because American subjects were equally familiar with and had equally favorable attitudes

toward Colgate and Crest. We used “Close-up” as a comparison brand in Thailand because Thai subjects were equally familiar with and had equally favorable attitudes toward Colgate and Close-up. Subjects were not familiar with Crystal as a toothpaste brand, but believed that Crystal was an appropriate name for toothpaste in both cultures.

Type of Comparison. The stimulus ad either highlighted superiority or similarity in the copy. In the superiority condition, the advertising established the superiority of the target brand by highlighting how superior the advertised brand is on an important attribute. In the similarity condition, the advertising established the extent to which the target brand is “similar” to the comparison brand.

In the superiority condition for the unfamiliar brand, subjects read: CRYSTAL is more effective in preventing tooth decay than CREST. Research has consistently shown that CRYSTAL provides cavity protection that is far superior to CREST. Try CRYSTAL today and experience better cavity prevention than CREST.

In the similarity condition, the statement for a familiar brand read: COLGATE is as effective in preventing tooth decay as CREST. Research has consistently shown that COLGATE provides cavity protection that is similar to CREST. Try COLGATE today and experience similar cavity prevention as CREST.

Dependent Variables



All dependent measures except for cognitive responses were assessed using scales whose numerical anchors were 1 and 7.

Evaluations. Subjects evaluated the target brand of toothpaste (Colgate or Crystal) on three 7-point scales anchored by “very unfavorable” versus “very favorable,” “very bad” versus “very good,” “very negative” versus “very positive.” Subjects also indicated their intentions to purchase the target product on a scale anchored by “would definitely not consider buying” versus “would definitely consider buying.” These items were averaged to form an evaluation index ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

Claim believability. After indicating product evaluations, subjects indicated the extent to which the arguments were believable. Claim believability was assessed on three point scales indicating the extent to which respondents thought the advertising information was “not at all (vs. highly) believable,” “not at all (vs. absolutely) true,” and “not at all (vs. totally) acceptable.” These items were averaged to form a claim believability index ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

Cognitive Responses. The process issues were examined by eliciting the cognitive responses. Subjects were asked to write “all thoughts that came to your mind while you were going through the ad, related or unrelated to the brands featured in the ad, to the claims made and the evidence provided, or to the ad per se.” Two judges blind to the hypotheses coded the thoughts following Ahluwalia et al. (2000). Respondents’ protocols were

accordingly coded as counter arguments, support arguments, and other message-related thoughts. Counter arguments are thoughts that suggest disbelief in the attribute claim or unfavorable about the performance of the focal brand. (e.g., I don't think Colgate is better than Crest in cavity prevention). Support arguments are thoughts that suggest belief in the attribute claim or favorable about the performance of the focal brand (e.g., Crystal offers better cavity prevention). Other message-related thoughts include inquiries for further information (e.g., How much does it cost?) and usage of the featured brands (e.g., I have used Crest before). 94% of the responses were successfully categorized by this procedure. Differences in the judges' opinions were resolved by a third judge.

Manipulation checks. Cultural orientation was assessed using the self-construal scale developed by Singelis (1994). This scale was used to ensure that the classification of the countries as individualist and collectivist cultures is appropriate. The scale was shown to be reliable and valid. The scale contains 15 independent items and 15 interdependent items. Prior research has shown that people in individualist cultures have independent self-construal and people in collectivist cultures have interdependent self-construals (Aaker and Williams 1998).

Subjects' familiarity with the target brand was measured on two scales anchored by "not at all familiar" versus "very familiar and "not at all well-known" versus "very well-known." They were averaged to form a familiarity index ( $r = .79$ ).

Other measures. Subjects rated the importance of the featured attribute in the ad and responded to an open-ended suspicion probe. They also indicated their sex and age.

## RESULTS

The data were analyzed using a 2 (cultural orientation) X 2 (type of comparison) X 2 (familiarity) between subjects ANOVA. No differential effects on the dependent measures were observed with respect to age and gender as covariates.

### Manipulation Checks

Subjects' cultural orientation was assessed using the Self-Construal Scale (Singelis 1994). Consistent with prior research, items that measure independent self-construal ( $\alpha = .70$ ) and interdependent self-construal ( $\alpha = .74$ ) were averaged so that each subject received two scores: one for the strength of independent self and one for the interdependent self. An ANOVA on the independent self-construal index revealed only a main effect of culture such that subject from the United States had higher ratings than those from Thailand ( $M_s = 4.77$  vs.  $4.30$ ;  $F(1,182) = 42.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, an ANOVA on the interdependent self-construal index yielded only a significant effect of culture such that Thai subjects had higher interdependent self-construal scales than American subjects ( $M_s = 4.66$  vs.  $4.36$ ;  $F(1, 182) = 10.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

An ANOVA on the familiarity index resulted in only a significant effect of familiarity such that Colgate was perceived to be more familiar than Crystal ( $M_s = 5.40$  vs.  $2.85$ ;  $F(1,182) = 360.29, p < .001$ ).

### Test of the Hypotheses

Evaluations. An ANOVA on the evaluation index revealed a significant effect of familiarity ( $F(1,182) = 11.73, p < .001$ ). Subjects evaluated the familiar brand (i.e., Colgate) more favorably than the unfamiliar brand (i.e., Crystal;  $M_s = 4.95$  vs.  $4.47$ ). More importantly, the two-way interaction of culture and the type of comparison was also significant ( $F(1,182) = 81.65, p < .001$ ). Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, the simple effects test indicated that in an individualist culture like the United States, superiority-based comparison led to more favorable evaluations than similarity-based comparison ( $M_s = 5.16$  vs.  $4.06$ ;  $F(1,182) = 33.28, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, consistent with Hypothesis 1b, in collectivist cultures like Thailand, similarity (vs. superiority) based comparison lead to more favorable evaluations ( $M_s = 5.51$  vs.  $4.13$ ;  $F(1,182) = 49.20, p < .001$ ). The means and standard deviations for major dependent variables are presented in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Claim believability. An ANOVA on the claim believability index revealed only a significant interaction of familiarity by culture ( $F(1,182) = 26.35, p < .001$ ). Consistent

with Hypothesis 2a, the simple effects test showed that, in the United States, consumers are more likely to believe the comparison claim, if the advertised brand is unfamiliar rather than familiar ( $M_s = 4.75$  vs.  $3.98$ ;  $F(1,182) = 14.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, consistent with Hypothesis 2b, Thai consumers were more likely to believe the comparison claim, if the advertised brand is familiar rather than unfamiliar ( $M_s = 4.64$  vs.  $3.93$ ;  $F(1,182) = 12.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Cognitive Responses. An ANOVA on the total number of thoughts yielded no significant effects ( $M = 3.25$ ;  $p$ 's  $> .36$ ). Subsequent analyses on the types of thoughts supported Hypothesis 3. Hypothesis 3a suggests that more support arguments would be generated in response to superiority (vs. similarity) based comparisons in the United States. In contrast, Hypothesis 3b suggests that Thai subjects would generate more support argument in response to similarity (vs. superiority) based comparisons. Consistent with our expectations, an ANOVA on the support arguments revealed a significant interaction between the type of comparison and culture ( $F(1,182) = 101.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The simple effects test suggested that American subjects generated more support thoughts when the comparison was based on superiority (vs. similarity) ( $M_s = 1.36$  vs.  $0.35$ ;  $F(1,182) = 46.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We also found that Thai subjects generated more support thoughts in response to similarity (vs. superiority) based comparison ( $M_s = 1.44$  vs.  $0.32$ ;  $F(1,182) = 55.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

An ANOVA on the number of counter arguments yielded only a significant two-way interaction between culture and type of comparison ( $F(1,182) = 63.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Specifically, American subjects generated more counter arguments in response to similarity (vs. superiority) based comparisons ( $M_s = 1.38$  vs.  $0.48$ ;  $F(1,182) = 23.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, Thai subjects generated more counter arguments in response to superiority (vs. similarity) based comparisons ( $M_s = 1.51$  vs.  $0.27$ ;  $F(1,182) = 41.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, an ANOVA on the other message related thoughts revealed no significant effects ( $M = 1.47$ ,  $p$ 's  $> .37$ ).

Regression analyses. Hypothesis 3a suggests that support arguments would mediate product evaluations for American subjects when the comparison is based on superiority. Hypothesis 3b proposes that support arguments would mediate evaluations for Thai subjects when the comparison is based on similarity. In order to test these predictions, we conducted regression analyses that utilized the number of support arguments and the dummy coded type of comparison as the independent variables and product evaluations as the dependent variable. The analyses were conducted separately for two cultures. Specifically, we conducted three sets of regressions for each culture, as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). In the first regression, evaluations were regressed on the type of comparison. In the second regression, the number of support arguments was regressed on the type of comparison. Finally, in the full model, evaluations were regressed on the type of comparison and the number of support arguments. Support arguments would be shown to mediate evaluations partially if (1) the type of comparison is significant in predicting evaluations; (2) the number of support arguments is significant in predicting the type of comparison; and (3) significance of the type of comparison

decreases when both the type of comparison and the number of support arguments are entered in the regression to predict evaluations. The findings are presented in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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For American subjects, we found a significant effect of type of comparison on evaluations such that more favorable evaluations were obtained when the comparison was based on superiority ( $\beta = 0.56, p < .001$ ). The path analysis showed that the significance of type of comparison decreased when the number of support arguments was included in the regression ( $\beta = 0.29, p < .01$ ). In sum, findings indicate that the effect of type of comparison on evaluations was partially mediated by the number of support arguments. We obtained similar findings for Thai subjects. Specifically, there was a significant effect of type of comparison on evaluations ( $\beta = -0.54, p < .001$ ). Thai subjects had more favorable evaluations when the comparison was based on association. We also found that this effect decreased when the number of support arguments was included in the regression ( $\beta = -0.36, p < .01$ ). Therefore, findings suggest that support arguments mediated evaluations partially for both American and Thai samples.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Theoretically, this research adds to the literature on advertising effectiveness and cross-cultural differences. Our findings extend previous research on comparative

advertising conducted in the United States (e.g., Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991) by showing that advertising content is culture specific and different types of creative strategies need to be used in different cultures. Superiority based claims are the norm and are compatible with individualist cultures. However, similarity based claims are likely to be culturally compatible in collectivist cultures and hence more persuasive.

Our findings also add to the growing literature in consumer behavior that documents cultural differences. As noted earlier, Aaker and Williams (1998) showed that cultural orientation has a systematic effect on emotional appeals. We extend their findings by demonstrating that cultural orientation also has a systematic impact on rational appeals such as comparative advertising. Also, emotional (vs. rational) appeals have been considered to be more successful strategies in collectivist countries (Douglas and Craig 2000). This research suggests that more rational appeals like comparative advertising can also be effective if they are executed in culturally compatible ways. Future research is needed to examine the persuasive impact of other rational appeals such as testimonials and two-sided appeals.

We also identified individualism-collectivism as a useful theoretical framework for examining cultural differences. However, it must be noted that individualism-collectivism is a multi-dimensional construct. Recent research on individualism-collectivism suggests that differences exist within individualist and collectivist cultures, and specific dimensions need to be identified (Triandis and Gelfand 1998). One such typology suggests the individualism-collectivism can be differentiated based on the extent to which horizontal or vertical relationships exist within a culture. Horizontal dimension



assumes that all group members are equal whereas vertical dimension assumes that group members differ in a hierarchical manner. It is likely that the superiority claims may have different impact within different individualist cultures. For example, superiority claims may have more appeal in individualist countries along the vertical dimension whereas the similarity appeals may also be persuasive along the horizontal individualism dimension.

We examined the differences in the persuasive impact of comparative advertising by using a direct comparison format. Our study explicitly compared the advertised brand with an identified comparison brand. Future research is needed to examine the efficacy of other types of comparisons such indirect comparisons or general comparisons. Yet another type of comparison based on valence may also be relevant in the cross-cultural context. As Jain (1993) points out, comparisons may be either positive or negative. In a positive comparison, the advertised brand is featured as having more of the featured attribute than the comparison brand. In the negative comparison, the advertised brand is featured as having the attribute that is not present in the comparison brand. While both comparisons are used in the United States, negative comparisons may not be acceptable in collectivist cultures. Given the group enhancement orientation of collectivist cultures, an explicit derogation may be unacceptable.

A more general theoretical extension of our research is the investigation of attitude strength and how strength affects processing of comparative claims across different cultures (Haugtvedt and Wegener 1994). While we did not address attitude strength issues in our research, it is likely that strength of attitudes associated with the target and comparison brands may moderate the effect of type of comparison on

evaluations. For example, in individualist cultures, consumers who have strong positive attitudes toward the comparison brand may prefer a similarity (vs. superiority) based comparison because such an appeal would be consistent with their individual opinions.

One possible limitation of our findings could be the generalizability to all collectivist countries. Our study was conducted only in a single collectivist country, Thailand. It is likely that the use of multiple collectivist countries can strengthen the generalizability of our findings. Interestingly, our findings are compatible with similar studies that have examined cross-cultural differences in advertising appeals (Han and Shavitt 1994). Han and Shavitt (1994) found that group oriented appeals are more effective in collectivist cultures. Consistent with this finding, we also showed that highlighting similarity, a defining characteristic of groups, is more effective in a collectivist country.

Yet another limitation could be that we used a single product. Using multiple products may also strengthen our findings. This may be of interest since previous research has shown that the persuasiveness of advertising appeals can be product specific. For example, Han and Shavitt (1994) showed that product characteristics moderated the overall effects found in their study. Cultural differences were stronger for products that were consumed with others than for products that were used individually. Our research documented relatively strong effects with toothpaste, an individually consumed product. Replicating our findings with products that are consumed with others may provide stronger effects and serve to strengthen our findings.

Investing in global markets has received considerable attention during the last decade both as a function of the liberalization of many economies and the market potential represented in these countries. The findings from this research may help managers better understand the culture based psychological processes underlying consumer behavior in different countries. It is likely to lead to a more informed approach to the design and execution of advertising strategies in multinational corporations. This research also sheds some light on the standardization vs. customization debate. Most published research on this issue is conceptual and this research provides empirical evidence to show that using superiority claim is inappropriate in collectivist cultures. At the policy level, our findings may help to change the official negative view of comparative advertising in collectivist countries. A culturally compatible similarity strategy may be used effectively to provide additional competitive information that may help the consumers make more informed product choices.

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**TABLE 1**

**MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR PRODUCT EVALUATIONS, CLAIM BELIABILITY AND THOUGHTS  
AS A FUNCTION OF CULTURE, TYPE OF COMPARISON AND FAMILIARITY**

	Individualist Culture (United States)				Collectivist Culture (Thailand)			
	Familiar		Unfamiliar		Familiar		Unfamiliar	
	Superiority	Similarity	Superiority	Similarity	Superiority	Similarity	Superiority	Similarity
Evaluations	5.38 (.78)	4.22 (.83)	4.94 (.79)	3.90 (.81)	4.44 (1.16)	5.76 (.96)	3.83 (1.13)	5.25 (1.02)
Claim Believability	3.91 (1.03)	4.06 (1.16)	4.84 (.89)	4.65 (.91)	4.42 (.97)	4.87 (.90)	3.78 (1.16)	4.09 (.81)
<b>Thoughts</b>								
Total	3.20 (1.26)	3.21 (1.89)	3.44 (1.16)	3.33 (1.05)	3.39 (1.59)	3.17 (.83)	3.29 (.91)	2.96 (1.14)
Support Arguments	1.24 (.83)	.25 (.44)	1.48 (1.09)	.46 (.66)	.35 (.57)	1.52 (.85)	.29 (.46)	1.36 (.66)
Counter Arguments	.44 (.58)	1.46 (1.35)	.52 (.82)	1.29 (.99)	1.44 (.95)	.13 (.46)	1.58 (1.21)	.41 (.59)
Other	1.52 (1.01)	1.50 (1.06)	1.44 (1.00)	1.58 (1.10)	1.61 (1.16)	1.52 (.79)	1.42 (1.14)	1.18 (1.02)

TABLE 2

**PATH ANALYSIS: THE EFFECT OF TYPE OF COMPARISON ON EVALUATIONS AND ITS MEDIATION BY SUPPORT ARGUMENTS**

	Individualist Culture (United States)	Collectivist Culture (Thailand)
Type of Comparison → Evaluations	0.56 <sup>a</sup> (t = 6.69) <sup>***</sup>	-0.54 (t = -6.04) <sup>***</sup>
Type of Comparison → Support Arguments	0.54 (t = 6.27) <sup>***</sup>	-0.66 (t = -8.38) <sup>***</sup>
Support Arguments → Evaluations	0.51 (t = 6.02) <sup>***</sup>	0.27 (t = 2.34) <sup>***</sup>
Type of Comparison → Evaluations (when support arguments are also included)	0.29 (t = 3.35) <sup>**</sup>	-0.36 (t = -3.08) <sup>**</sup>

NOTE. -- <sup>a</sup>: standardized beta values.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> : p < .001.

<sup>\*\*</sup> : p < .01



  
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