East Meets West?: Regulatory Focus and Advertising Appeals in Korea, Canada, and the United States

Wonkyong Beth Lee, Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, Canada
Geoffrey T. Fong, Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, Canada
Mark P. Zanna, Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, Canada
Timothy Dewhirst, Department of Marketing and Consumer Studies, University of Guelph, Canada

To examine possible differences in persuasion between Asian and North American cultures, a content analysis of magazine ads and two experiments were conducted with respect to regulatory focus theory. The content analysis study revealed that Korean ads were more likely than North American ads to include promotion focus themes. To determine whether Koreans are likely to accept this apparent cultural shift toward Western ideas in Korean advertising, two experiments were conducted. Both Study 2 (using real ads) and Study 3 (using manipulated ads) revealed that Koreans preferred prevention focus advertising. A significant discrepancy is seemingly apparent between what advertisers are trying to communicate with consumers in Korea and what Korean consumers most value.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research that assesses cross-cultural differences in persuasion has revealed mixed results. Some researchers have found that different cultural appeals are utilized among different cultures in accordance with their cultural values (Han and Shavitt 1994; Kim and Markus 1999). However, more recent content analyses of advertising in Asian countries reveal that advertising appeals have seemingly become more Westernized (Khairullah and Khairullah 2002; Zhang and Shavitt 2003). Because changes in advertising appeals, in a given society, often echo changes in consumption and cultural values (Pollay 1986), the recently observed Westernized appeals in Asian advertising may reflect Asians’ Westernization.

It is not clear if advertising that promotes new values, which are different from a culture’s traditional values, may prompt group members to be resistant to potential changes in their society. The focus of our study is to further address this issue. By using regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997), we first examine whether the strong differences previously found between North American and Korean ads, in accordance to individualism and collectivism themes, remain apparent considering that Korea has recently undergone a dramatic shift toward embracing Western cultural values. Second, we seek to determine whether Koreans are likely to accept this potential shift toward Western ideals that may be apparent in Korean print advertising.

In Study 1, we conducted a content analysis of magazine ads, in which Korean and Canadian coders rated randomly selected ads from their own culture concerning promotion focus and prevention focus regulatory themes. Contrary to earlier findings (Han and Shavitt 1994; Kim and Markus 1999), Korean ads were more likely than North American ads to include promotion focus themes, and for most themes, Korean ads were significantly less likely than North American ads to be prevention focus oriented (although there was no overall difference). These findings were consistent across all magazine and product categories. Although this pattern of results may reflect that Korea has undergone a major economic and cultural shift toward Western ideas and ideals, as many other Asian countries are experiencing, it is possible that even if current Korean advertising is meant to commonly communicate Western values, Korean consumers may not be effectively persuaded by the advertising appeals. To evaluate the effectiveness of advertising appeals in recent Korean ads (i.e., promotion focus oriented), Study 2 was conducted.

In Study 2, 50 undergraduate and graduate students (21 Koreans and 29 European Canadians) were shown a set of magazine ads and were asked about their attitudes toward the ads. Each set included six Korean ads and six North American ads. The ads contained either high promotion focus themes with low prevention themes, or high prevention focus themes with low promotion themes, which were based on the results from Study 1. The ads were matched by the product across culture. Participants evaluated the ad, the product, and their intention of purchasing the product. The three ratings were significantly inter-correlated (mean \( r = .67 \)), thus they were transformed to z scores and were averaged to form an ad evaluation index. The results showed that Canadians preferred North American ads to Korean ads, whereas Koreans preferred Korean ads to North American ads (\( F = 27.32, p < .001 \)). More importantly, Canadians preferred ads with high promotion and low prevention focus themes, whereas Koreans preferred ads with high prevention and low promotion focus themes (\( F = 3.89, p = .054 \)).

For Study 2, we took existing ads and asked about participants’ attitudes toward the ads; we found that Koreans liked ads with high prevention focus themes compared to Canadian participants. Recognizing that the ads Koreans favored, more than Canadians, might be genuinely attractive and potentially convey prevention themes as well, we used a message framing method to experimentally manipulate the ads for Study 3 in an attempt to clarify this issue.

In Study 3, we manipulated an ad for a brand that is familiar to both Korean and Canadian participants (i.e., Dove body lotion), using a message framing method with either a promotion focus (e.g., to make your skin soft and smooth, use Dove body lotion; enrich your skin in cold and dry winter weather) or prevention focus theme (e.g., to prevent dry and itchy skin, use Dove body lotion; Dove body lotion will protect your skin from cold and dry winter weather). Twenty-five Korean and 32 Canadian undergraduate students from a Canadian university were asked about their attitudes toward the ad. Attitude measures were the same as Study 2. We conducted a 2 (culture: Koreans vs. Canadians) X 2 (regulatory focus framing: promotion vs. prevention) ANOVA. The results showed that there was no significant main effect of either culture or the message framing (\( F = 1.32, ns, F = .001, ns \), respectively), however we found an interaction between the two (\( F = 3.4, p = .07 \)). Simple effect analyses revealed that there was a significant difference in preference of the prevention framed ad between Canadians and Koreans; Koreans significantly preferred the prevention focus framed message compared to Canadians.

In sum, it appears that there may be significant discrepancies between what advertisers try to communicate with consumers in Korea (Study 1) and what Korean consumers most value (Study 2 and 3).

References