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The Standardisation of Advertising in the Mercosur: A Process Oriented Perspective

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**THE STANDARDISATION OF ADVERTISING
IN THE MERCOSUR: A PROCESS ORIENTED
PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

Research on the international advertising standardisation process has failed to analyse the different *process* options that companies can choose to achieve standardisation. This paper derives three basic options from the literature ("central development", "pattern standardisation", "advertising transference") and proposes that the choice of a process option will depend on company commitment to the standardisation policy. Using a quantitative manager survey in the Mercosur (South America), it analyses company practices in relation to these options. Results show that that most companies are choosing "central development" and that branding elements of advertising strategy are more frequently standardised than those related to local market conditions.

*Keywords: International advertising
standardisation, process standardisation, Mercosur,
Latin America*

INTRODUCTION

While international advertising standardisation (IAS) is a topic that has been widely studied in the past, previous research has tended to concentrate on comparative studies measuring how far advertising *programmes* have been standardised. Although a few studies have analysed *process* issues within the field (Kirpalani, Laroche and Darmon, 1988; Tai, 1997; Melewar, Turnbull, and Balabanis 2000; Laroche et al. 2001) there is a gap in the literature in relation to the process *options* that companies can choose in order to achieve IAS.

This paper makes a contribution to IAS literature as it first derives from the literature three basic process options that a company can take in order to achieve standardised advertising:

a) the central development of a standardised advertising *campaign* ("central development"), b) the central definition of international advertising campaign *elements* to be used for local developments ("pattern standardisation"), and, c) the transference of ready advertising campaigns developed for one market to another ("advertising transference"). Secondly, the paper proposes that the choice of a process option to achieve IAS will depend on the company's commitment towards the IAS policy.

In order to explore the use of these options in practice, the first research question (RQ1) in this paper addresses the frequency with which each process option is being taken in practice. The second question (RQ2) concentrates on pattern standardisers and analyses the frequency with which different elements of advertising strategy are being standardised. The research questions are analysed through a local manager survey that was carried out in the four South American countries that comprise the economic integration zone called Mercosur, namely Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

In terms of its structure, the paper first positions itself within the IAS field. Subsequently, it derives from the literature the process options for companies to achieve IAS. After that, it presents the research questions addressed in the study as well as the methodology used. A discussion of the findings is then presented along with their implications and directions for future research. Finally, limitations are pointed out.

PROCESS STANDARDISATION AND ITS DIFFERENT PATHS

Recent literature reviews on IAS (Melewar and Vemmervik 2004; Taylor and Johnson 2002) show that, even after four decades of research, the issue remains highly topical. In the past, much attention has been devoted to the debate between supporters of localisation and supporters of standardisation at either end of the standardisation continuum and, more recently, to the consideration of the contingency approach in the middle (Agrawal 1995; Onkvisit and Shaw 1999). Surprisingly, however, although marketing processes were found to be more suitable for standardisation than marketing programmes (Sorenson and Wiechmann 1975; Onkvisit and Shaw 1990), little research has been carried out on process standardisation. Within this context, research has so far concentrated on issues of headquarters role in and control over standardisation decisions (Kirpalani *et al.* 1988; Tai 1997; Melewar *et al.* 2000; Laroche et al. 2001).

An exhaustive review of the literature on process IAS carried out for this paper suggests, however, that there is no conceptual framework defining the process options in IAS, i.e. the different routes that a company can take to using campaigns with common elements in different national markets. One qualitative study took a first step in this regard, however. In his study of the European Community, Harris (1994b, 1996) found that companies use three basic approaches to standardisation: "cross-fertilisation" (when national markets produce their own advertising campaigns, which, when particularly successful, are replicated in other markets), "lead market system" (when one country is responsible for all marketing measures for a certain product and then, in principle, all other markets adopt these measures for local use), and, "central development" (when corporate headquarters (HQ) develop the standardised campaign). Harris (1994b) concluded, however, that his study did not produce definitive results given that the categorisation was not always applicable owing to mixed procedures.

THIS STUDY'S PROPOSITION

This paper builds on Harris' (1994b, 1996) work as well as that of Peebles, Ryans and Vernon's (1977) and proposes a new categorisation for the different process options to IAS depending on company commitment to the policy (table 1).

TABLE 1: PATHS TO INTERNATIONAL ADVERTISING STANDARDISATION

International advertising standardisation option	Standardisation through centralised advertising development	Pattern standardisation, (i.e., standardisation through pre-defined international advertising elements)	Standardisation through advertising transference	No standardisation (i.e. localisation)
Description	The advertising campaign is originally developed for its use in more than one country by either headquarters, the lead market, or the group of local branches that will use it.	Advertising parameters for a brand are defined by headquarters to be applied in a group of countries. Local branches then develop their own local campaign based on these parameters.	A successful national advertising campaign is transferred to other national markets.	Campaigns are developed at a local level.
Degree of commitment to the international advertising standardisation concept	highest	Medium (i.e., higher or lower depending on the amount of pre-defined advertising elements).	lowest	Non-existent.

According to this categorisation, companies that are most highly committed to standardisation, i.e. those that believe in its general benefits and feasibility, will seek from the outset to develop a campaign for a number of markets (*"standardisation through centralised advertising development"*). Companies with a medium degree of commitment to standardisation will, in turn, decide to standardise certain strategic elements of their advertising by centrally defining them for international use (*"pattern standardisation"* as proposed by Peebles *et al.* 1977). Thus, in pattern standardisation national subsidiaries will develop their own local campaigns but based on the internationally standardised advertising elements and with the freedom to adapt all other elements. Companies with a low commitment to IAS will only transfer existing (and probably successful) campaigns from one market to another (*"international advertising transference"*). Finally, the localisation option completes the standardisation-localisation continuum and includes companies that show no commitment to IAS at all.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on this framework, this study proposes to address the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: How often are the following IAS process options being followed in practice: a) centralised advertising development, b) pattern standardisation, c) international advertising transference?

RQ2: Which elements of advertising strategy (i.e. brand positioning, advertising objectives, target

group, budget decisions, media decisions, brand benefits, reasons-why and advertising tonality) are being more/less often standardised by pattern standardisers?

The choice of the elements of advertising strategy to be analysed was made on the basis of a thorough review of the Anglo-Saxon, Spanish and German literatures as well as from practitioner approaches used by multinational advertising networks¹. This review was considered as necessary given that no consistency was found in previous studies in the field in relation to what advertising strategic elements are in themselves, nor in relation to tactical or executional elements (Kirpalani *et al.* 1988; Synodinos *et al.* 1989; Tai 1997).

RESEARCH METHOD

Given that the objective of this study was to analyse the RQs through a quantitative empirical study, a survey of key decision-makers was considered to be the most suitable research method. It was decided to address such decision-makers at a local level as HQ managers have been found to show an imprecise knowledge of local realities (Dunn 1976).

In terms of geography, the decision was made to address a region/group of countries of the world that would be appropriate for IAS research. This appropriateness was defined in terms of three criteria. Firstly, this region should allow for significance of results by being substantial both in economic terms as well as in terms of population. Secondly, it should expand the geographic scope of international marketing knowledge by focusing on countries beyond the traditional targets used

¹ For the academic approaches see e.g. Kaynak 1989; Rossiter and Percy 1999; Frazer 1983; Dunn and Barban 1986; Sagarmnaga 1973, Pérez and Martínez 1981; Ferrer, Maciá and Pérez 1999; Diller 1994; Kroeber-Riel and Esch 2000. For the practitioner approaches, see Young & Rubicam's "advertising brief", Doyle, Dane, Bernbach's ROI approach, Ogilvy and Mather's "creative brief" (all models were obtained by contacting US and European offices of the agencies named).

in previous research (i.e. the USA, the EU and Asia). Thirdly, it should possess two characteristics that were found to be beneficial for standardisation studies: "cultural proximity" (Tai 1997; Samiee *et al.* 2003) and "economic integration" (Boddewyn, Soehl and Picard 1986; Sriram and Gopalakrishna 1991).

Thus, the choice was made to address the Mercosur ("Mercado Común del Sur", Common Market of the South), i.e. the regional economic integration zone in South America consisting of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay (Coffey 1998). In terms of the first criterion presented above, i.e. significance of results, the Mercosur was found to be suitable because, with a combined GDP of nearly US\$ 780,000m (2004) and a population of 224m inhabitants (Busqueda 2005), it is comparable with other geographic areas covered in previous studies in the field. Studying the Mercosur also allowed an expansion of the geographic scope of international marketing knowledge because, in over forty years of research in the field, only three studies have dealt with the broader area of Latin America (Brandt and Hulbert 1977; Grosse and Zinn 1991; Chhabra 1996) and only one focused on local managers in the region (Brandt and Hulbert's 1977 study of Brazilian managers). A study of the Mercosur further met the "cultural proximity" criterion because of the Luso-Hispanic background and language of the member countries (Brazil was colonised by Portugal while the other three countries were colonised by Spain). Finally, the "economic integration" criterion was met by the fact that the Mercosur has now been in existence for 10 years.

Based on the reasonable assumption that study targets (local company managers) would have access to the internet, a web-based questionnaire was developed and administered to approximately 1,500 managers in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay between March and April 2005 and a further 2,200 followed in Brazil in November 2005. In order to access these managers, the authors sought the help of well-known local universities in the four countries. Supportive universities (see Appendix 1 for details) thus forwarded an e-mail prepared by the authors to their former and current executive MBA students, i.e. students that were working in a company full-time while pursuing this degree, asking for their collaboration in the study. The e-mails asked recipients to either collaborate themselves in cases where they were key-decision makers in the marketing area, or to forward it to a suitable colleague within their organisations.

In this way, 230 usable responses have been received so far although the Brazilian survey is still under way. It must be born in mind that, unfortunately, a response rate cannot be calculated as the universities could not select the e-mail recipients in a way that assured that every recipient would also be a potential participant (i.e. a marketing key-decision maker working for an international company). However, given that no previous study in the field has ever managed to successfully use self-administered questionnaires to survey local managers in the whole of Latin America, the obtained number of responses can certainly be seen as a success.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The results presented here are the outcome of a preliminary analysis given that the study is still ongoing. According to the data gathered so far, the majority of respondents are based in Argentina (60%), followed by Uruguay (27%). Distribution according to product type shows consumer goods as the main group in terms of business activity (47%), followed by services (35%). Distribution according to respondent position shows that almost 2/3 of them are either CEOs or Marketing/Commercial Directors, a fact that ensures the validity of the received answers. Finally, distribution according to HQ base shows that some 13% of the companies have their HQ in Mercosur countries.

RQ1 aimed at analysing how frequently each of the different process options was used by companies in practice. Results show (figure 1) that only 16% of respondents are transferring existing campaigns from one country to another, while 44% are using "truly" international campaigns (i.e. those "born" international), and 25% are developing local campaigns based on an internationally pre-defined "pattern". Based on the proposition that the choice of an option would depend on company commitment to the IAS policy, results show that this commitment is relatively high.

RQ2 aimed at identifying the elements of advertising strategy that are most and least often standardised by those companies that are centrally defining advertising strategic elements for international use ("pattern standardisers"). Results show (figure 2) that "positioning statement" (89%), "brand benefits" (47%) and "advertising tonality" (35%) are the most commonly pre-defined elements, while media mix (19%), target group (14%) and budget setting methods (11%) are the least often standardised.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The evidence so far shows that IAS remains not only a topical issue in academic research but a policy companies feel very committed to in practice: 69% of respondents are either centrally developing whole advertising campaigns or campaign elements for international use. This finding calls for more research in the IAS field given that recent studies arrived at the opposite conclusion with respect to the extent of IAS (e.g. Kanso and Nelson 2002). Findings in relation to the standardisation of specific advertising strategic elements suggest that brand related aspects (e.g. positioning, benefits and advertising tonality) are more often standardised than aspects more strongly affected by local market conditions (e.g. target group media and budget decisions). This finding suggests a division between advertising strategic elements that *could* be standardised as opposed to those that *should* be localised, although further research will also be needed here to validate the results obtained by this study. The expectation is that within the next few weeks, a larger number of responses (including more responses from Brazil) will enrich the results so far obtained so that a more in-depth statistical analysis can be presented at the conference.

LIMITATIONS

The authors acknowledge that this exploratory study bears limitations in terms of sample selection, non-response bias due to respondent self-selection, and non-randomness of the sample. Therefore, more work needs to be done in this area in order to validate the results of this study. Nevertheless, the decision to accept these limitations in research design was consciously made in order to facilitate a higher response rate than would otherwise have been achieved from managers in this rather unexplored geographic area in terms of marketing and advertising standardisation issues.

APPENDIX I

The following universities have supported the study:

- Universidad Austral, IAE (Argentina)
- Universidad Torcuato di Tella (Argentina)
- Universidad de São Paulo (Brazil)
- Escola Superior de Propaganda e Marketing (Brazil)
- Universidad Católica (Paraguay)
- Universidad ORT (Uruguay)
- Universidad de Montevideo (Uruguay)
- Universidad Católica (Uruguay)
- Universidad de la Empresa (Uruguay)

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FIGURE 1: FREQUENCY OF USE OF THE DIFFERENT PROCESS OPTIONS TO IAS IN THE MERCOSUR

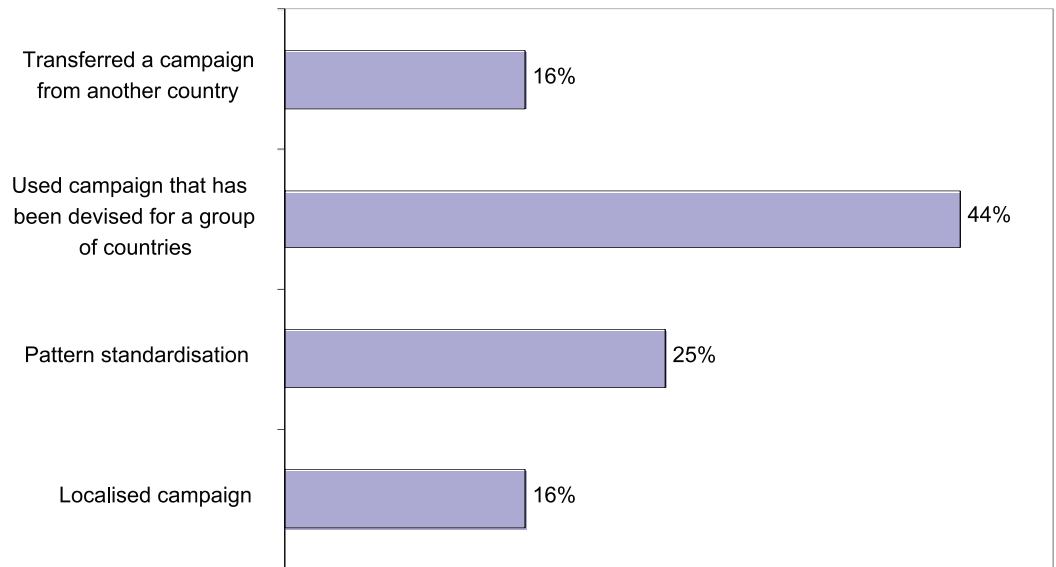
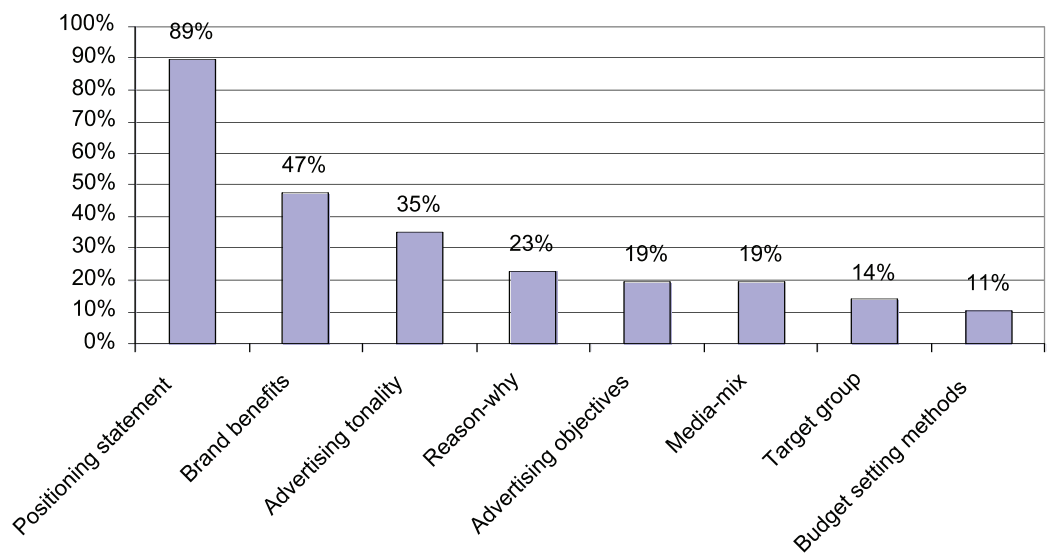


FIGURE 2: FREQUENCY OF STANDARDISATION OF ADVERTISING STRATEGIC ELEMENTS FOR PATTERN STANDARDISERS



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