Consumer Perspectives on Standardization in International Advertising: A Student Sample

Despite comprehensive discussion in the literature on standardization versus localization of international advertising, the term standardization itself still needs clarification; especially the question which elements of advertisements must be identical so that an international advertising campaign is perceived as standardized needs further research. Since consumers are the target group of advertising, it is essential to conduct such research from their perspective. This research provides the required perspective using multivariate analysis methods, choosing students as an important example for a consumer segment. Empirical surveys conducted in three European countries, using examples of print advertisements, suggest that visual aspects exert the most significant influence on the perceived similarity of advertising.

The standardization of international advertising is a topic that has already been widely discussed. From the supplier side, the case for standardization in international advertising results mainly from a potential for cost reduction and other efficiency gains within the firm (Boote, 1982; Harvey, 1993; Backhaus, Büschken, and Voeth, 2000). Efficiency gains from standardization in advertising will result from cost reductions in strategy and conception, execution and production or placement of the campaign, or any combination of these (Harvey, 1993). However, due to the idiosyncratic nature of each company's internal and external parameters (e.g., cost, organizational structure, etc.), general statements on possible cost reductions independent of a specific company, can only be made within narrow limitations (Sriram and Gopalakrishna, 1991).

On the customer side, the assimilation and homogenization of consumer needs and purchasing behavior across national borders are points in favor of standardization (Elinder, 1965; Levitt, 1983; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987; Hite and Fraser, 1988; Duncan and Ramaprasad, 1995; Backhaus, Büschken, and Voeth, 2000). However, the influence of standardization on the efficacy of an international advertising campaign, i.e., the impact of advertising standardization on revenue through influencing consumer purchasing behavior, can be positive or negative (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). On the one hand, a positive effect from standardization can be achieved by preventing image confusion and consumer irritation. Consumers are confronted increasingly with advertising from sources other than their home countries, due to increasing geographic customer mobility (e.g., because of tourism) and media spillover (e.g., global broadcasting). This results in a broadening "perceptual sphere" (Elinder, 1965; Backhaus, Büschken, and Voeth, 2000). Divergences in localized advertising campaigns may result in image confusion and irritation that may exert a negative influence on purchasing behavior and thus on revenue (Hill and James, 1990; Harvey, 1993). On the other hand, the negative effects of standardization are caused by the decreased ability to account for the specific characteristics of each country, its target consumers, and their purchasing behavior (Buzzell, 1968). The degree and direction of the impact on effectiveness depends on consumer reaction.

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RESEARCH OBJECTIVE
Although the advantages and disadvantages of a standardized approach to international marketing have already been widely discussed, the concept of standardization itself remains predominantly vague (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987; Harris, 1996). Especially the question of which elements of an advertisement should be homogeneous, in order for the advertising campaign to be considered standardized from the perspective of the target group, i.e., consumers, has not been examined thoroughly. A consumer perspective is particularly crucial for this kind of research. Because it is their purchasing behavior that should be influenced positively by the use of standardized advertising, consumers' perception of similarity should be considered as decisive (Backhaus et al., 1999).

Clearly, the question raised above is not only of theoretical but also of practical relevance to international marketing. If an advertiser decides to standardize its international advertising campaigns because of the advantages of harmonized advertising, it will inevitably be confronted with the question of what exactly constitutes standardized advertising. In this context, of particular interest are those components of an advertisement that most influence the perception of similarity. Knowing these elements, it is possible to design a standardized advertising campaign by harmonizing precisely these parts. It is then possible to leave room for country-specific modifications within those components of an advertisement that are not decisive for the perception of similarity.

Against this background, our research objective is to establish which elements of an advertisement are decisive to the perception of standardization by the target group for international advertising. This perspective was derived through empirical research employing multivariate analysis methods. As students are—due to their high degree of education and their likely international orientation—a prominent target group of international advertising, we chose students as an example of a consumer segment. The multivariate methods used for this study are conjoint analysis and multidimensional scaling. These two methods were used because they complement one another, that is, the disadvantages of conjoint analysis are avoided by applying multidimensional scaling and vice versa. Thus, a joint application of these two methods leads to more reliable results, as it is possible to draw conclusions concerning the validity of the results by monitoring the similarities or differences between the results provided by the two methods. Through empirical research using examples of advertisements, we demonstrate the use of these multivariate methods. Because previous studies in the field of cross-cultural psychology suggest a link between cultural and perceptual differences, we have conducted the empirical studies in several European countries in order to gain insight into potentially different perceptions of similarity from country to country (Unwin, 1974; Friedmann, 1986; Mueller, 1996).

Previous research
In considering standardization versus localization, researchers have provided several interpretations of standardization. One view is that a standardized advertising campaign should use the same advertisement internationally with minimal, if any, thematic copy or illustration adaptation, with the only country-specific concession being the use of the respective national language (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987; Reiter and Santana, 1992). Another view proposes that standardization means standardizing one or several of the three basic parts of an advertising campaign, these basic parts being the creative selling proposition, the actual elements of an advertisement, and the language. A third view defines standardized advertising as a campaign that uses the same theme, regardless of changes in its copy or illustration (Duncan and Ramaprasad, 1995; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). These different views assume that different elements are decisive to the perception of similarity.

Apart from these rather qualitative assessments on whether advertisements can be considered standardized, several more quantitative approaches have recently been developed in the literature. (Synodinos, Keown, and Jacobs, 1989; Whitelock and Chung, 1989; Mueller, 1990; Metha, 1992; Duncan and Ramaprasad, 1995). Two different schools of thought have emerged in this field of research. The questionnaire survey approach (Attour and Harris, 1997) involves sending questionnaires to advertising executives and managers, asking them to evaluate the extent of standardization of their own advertisements (Synodinos, Keown, and Jacobs, 1989; Duncan and Ramaprasad, 1995). Within the framework of content analysis, marketing experts give their opinion on the standardization of a set of advertisements (Whitelock and Chung, 1989; Mueller, 1990). Findings suggest that, while content analysis provides information with respect to the standardization actually practiced by international companies, the questionnaire survey method does not satisfy this requirement (Attour and Harris, 1997). Therefore, pursuing the path of content analysis seems more promising. Basically, two different models have been developed for content analysis (Whitelock and Chung, 1989; Mueller, 1990). Both are supplier-oriented, i.e., marketing experts give their opinion on whether international advertising can be considered standardized.
The primary purpose of Mueller’s model is to identify the elements most likely to be standardized in current international advertising campaigns (Mueller, 1990). In the study, print and TV advertisements appearing in Germany, Japan, and in the United States for American products, are analyzed using the U.S. advertisements as reference objects. The model takes into account a broad catalogue of criteria that is thought to influence perceptions of similarity: packaging shown, product name, version of product(s) shown, theme, slogan, headline, subhead, body copy, models/spokespersons, visuals/background scenes, and attributes highlighted (Mueller, 1990).

Each advertisement from Germany and Japan is compared to its U.S. counterpart in terms of whether it is similar or not with respect to a particular criterion. The greater the perceived similarity with respect to a specific element, the fewer points it gains on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. Finally, the total score for each advertisement is summed over all criteria as an overall mean leading to a certain degree of standardization. The lower the overall score, the more standardized the “foreign” advertising is considered to be (Mueller, 1990).

In their research, Whitelock and Chung developed a model to compare advertisements used in culturally different countries (Whitelock and Chung, 1989). The study is based on advertisements from France and the United Kingdom. Whitelock and Chung take into account six elements they assume influence the perception of standardization: picture, size, color, general layout, caption, and explanatory text. A diverging criterion yields a certain score. The individual scores lead to an explicit weighting of the criteria: The picture was established as the most significant factor determining the perception of similarity, as a divergence in picture yields 10 points. General layout is considered to be less important, as a different general layout only yields a score of 1. Depending on the resulting final scores, the authors define three distinct degrees of standardization: total standardization, no standardization, and partial standardization.

These models offer two main advantages. First, they are designed to be universally applicable. Second, the question of which elements of a campaign should be identical in order to achieve a standardized campaign can be answered quite precisely, since these scoring models facilitate a quantitative judgment concerning the selected criteria. However, as indicated earlier, the crucial problem with both models is an almost complete lack of consumer participation. Marketing experts have selected the criteria that they consider to be important for the perception of similarity and have fixed the individual weights. Although the selection of criteria seems plausible, it is not derived from target-group-oriented empirical evidence. The criteria weightings are also rather arbitrary, explicit as in the Whitelock and Chung model or implicit as in the Mueller model. Also, the completeness of the catalogue for capturing consumer perception is questionable since it is not supported by any empirical evidence. Despite these problems, most of the following studies have not made any major methodical modifications, because they all take a supplier perspective (Synodinos, Keown, and Jacobs, 1989; Reiter and Santana, 1992; Seitz and Jehar, 1993; Attour and Harris, 1997). Because substantial discrepancies in the perception of standardization may exist between advertiser and target-group perspectives, the key issue is to find the elements that are decisive to the target consumer’s perception of similarity.

Implementing a consumer perspective using multivariate analysis methods

In this research, we evaluate the elements of an advertisement most important in forming consumer perceptions of similarity, by applying conjoint analysis and multidimensional scaling. Conjoint analysis has proven to be a valuable means of measuring preferences and simulating purchasing decisions (Green and Srinivasan, 1990; Voeth, 1998; Backhaus et al., 2000). As a decompositional method, it is suitable for simulating, capturing, and reflecting integral, holistic consumer-preference formation. As a concept of subjective benefit, preferences result from the interaction of various benefit elements (levels of attributes) that the analyzed objects possess. The general objective of conjoint analysis is to identify the importance of different attributes of an object in relation to the respondents’ total preferences. Conjoint analysis provides three kinds of results: part-worth for all levels of the analyzed attributes, relative importance figures, and total utilities as sums (in the additive conjoint analysis model) of the corresponding part-worth for the individual objects. Conjoint analysis thus allows the identification, explanation, and prediction of consumer choice and purchase decision making concerning products with a multitude of attributes and levels, as well as showing the impact of the attributes on this process (Green and Srinivasan, 1978; Perrey, 1996; Voeth, 1998).

We propose here that conjoint analysis can be used as a method for evaluating not only preference formation but also perceptions of similarity. We believe that perceptions of similarity between print advertisements also constitute a holistic and integral process that can be reflected compositionally. Also, we assume it to be derived from the interaction of similarity perceptions regarding individual ele-
ments of the advertisement (e.g., "picture," "headline," etc.). This means assuming that a high degree of similarity of individual advertisement elements, compared to the corresponding elements of the reference object, increases the perceived similarity of the entire advertisement. The objective of conjoint analysis in this framework is thus to identify the significance of different attributes for the total perception of standardization. The interpretation of the conjoint analysis results has to be adapted in this context. A high part-worth or a high total utility of an advertisement is considered to reflect a high degree of similarity with regard to the reference object. From the relative importance figures, it is then apparent how significant an attribute is for the perception of similarity.

Therefore, by applying conjoint analysis, we obtain quantitative information about the importance of the different attributes for perceived similarity. This is an advantage offered by this method, compared with multidimensional scaling. This quantitative information could, for example, be used in a scoring model to measure the perceived degree of standardization with respect to a set of advertisements. In such a model, one would use the relative importance figures as weights, thus replacing the somewhat arbitrary weighting by experts (such as in the Whitelock and Chung model) by a more consumer-oriented perspective (Whitelock and Chung, 1989). However, the drawback of conjoint analysis is that the researcher defines the attributes that the researcher assumes to be relevant to the consumer perception of standardization. This creates a risk of neglecting relevant variables or even factors by limiting the catalogue and pre-selecting the variables. This disadvantage does not apply to multidimensional scaling.

Multidimensional scaling is a multivariate statistical method that was developed in the behavioral and social sciences to analyze the structures relating to objects and people. Multidimensional scaling is currently used in a wide variety of fields, especially in marketing research. With respect to the methodology, multidimensional scaling displays the structure of certain data as relations between points in a multidimensional space. The data that form the basis for such an analysis are referred to as dissimilarity data, distances, or proximities. They reflect the amount of dissimilarity or similarity between pairs of objects and are obtained by simply letting the respondents judge the similarity or dissimilarity between two objects. The objects are then arranged in a multidimensional space, the distances between the objects reflecting the degree of perceived similarity or dissimilarity. The dimensions of the multidimensional space, in which the objects are located through multidimensional scaling, are assumed to represent the criteria that the respondents apply in order to compare the objects. It is then up to the researcher to interpret the dimensions of the multidimensional space and thus establish which attributes play the most important role in respondents' perceptions when evaluating the objects. To facilitate an interpretation of the results, it is often necessary to rotate the plot. The Varimax-rotation is most commonly used. (Green, Carmone, and Smith, 1989; Davison, 1992; Norusis, 1997; Kim, Chatterjee, DeSarbo, and Bijnol, 1999).

In our research, multidimensional scaling is used to identify the criteria relevant to the perceived similarity of a set of advertisements. Compared with conjoint analysis, the use of multidimensional scaling has the advantage of being suitable for capturing the entirety of consumer perception. The respondents are not forced to judge the objects with regard to a few pre-determined criteria but are instead asked about their holistic impression of similarity between the objects, which forms their rankings. However, the drawback associated with this avoidance of predetermination is greater difficulty in interpreting the final dimensions (Backhaus et al., 2000). Additionally, multidimensional scaling does not provide the researcher with quantitative information on the importance of the individual dimensions within the multidimensional space. These disadvantages are avoided when applying conjoint analysis.

**Design of the empirical surveys using a student sample**

The multivariate analysis methods outlined above require empirical surveys in order to gather the necessary data. Because previous studies indicate that, due to perception divergences, specific sets of criteria and specific weightings of these criteria may apply to different countries and cultural areas, this study was conducted in three different European countries (Unwin, 1974; Friedmann, 1986; Onkvis and Shaw, 1987; Hill and James, 1990; Mueller, 1996). The surveys were conducted in December 1999 in Münster, Germany, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, and Montpellier, France. In each country, 72 respondents were questioned. The respondents were students, mainly students of the faculty of business administration and the faculty of law. We selected students because they are particularly likely to be internationally orientated and have a high degree of education. Therefore, they are probably exposed to advertising from sources other than their home countries. For this reason they can be seen as an important target group for international advertising, i.e., standardized advertising to prevent image confusion and irritation. The students were selected randomly. However, it was ensured that every re-
spondent participated in only one survey, that is, either in the conjoint analysis survey or in the multidimensional scaling survey.

The set of advertisements used in this study is based on original BMW print advertisements. The attributes have been selected in such a way that the respondents can immediately discern the different levels. Table 1 shows the attributes and levels used in the study.

The advertisements can diverge on all four attributes. The pictures differ in terms of background, dominant, color and the perspective from which the car is shown. The general layouts are characterized by various frames and writing styles. Two aspects are communicated alternatively: first, the entire BMW 5 or second, a single component of the equipment. Regardless of whether the particular national language or English is used, the respondents can easily understand both aspects.

The above process leads to a (4 × 2 × 2 × 2) design with 32 different fictional stimuli. For the surveys, the 32 fictional stimuli were reduced. The reason was that 32 stimuli necessitate the judgment of 496 pairs of advertisements in the multidimensional scaling survey. This demands too much of respondents. Thus, a reduced orthogonal design consisting of eight advertisements was constructed. This reduced the number of pairs to be rated for the multidimensional scaling survey to 28. For the conjoint analysis, the number of stimuli was doubled to 16, because a reduced orthogonal design for the conjoint analysis may create a risk of estimation inaccuracy in the case of interaction effects or heterogeneous preference structures (Teichert, 1994).

For the conjoint analysis, the stimulus closest to the original German advertisement was chosen as a reference for comparing all other stimuli. Respondents were asked to rank the other 15 advertisements according to their perception of decreasing similarity to this reference object. In order to avoid the influence of visual elements not captured in the above attributes, the respondents were informed briefly about attributes and levels prior to the survey.

For the multidimensional scaling survey, respondents were asked to compare pairs of advertisements and rate them on a scale from 1 to 7. A score of “1” indicates that the two advertisements are dissimilar; “7” signifies that the two advertisements are very similar. Since the respondents should not be influenced by the attributes chosen by the researcher, they were not informed about the attributes and their levels.

RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL SURVEYS
The estimation results of the conjoint analysis, aggregated across all 36 respondents in each country, are presented in Table 2.

The results for Pearson’s R and Kendall’s Tau indicate good quality estimations for each survey, i.e., the empirical ranking data can be reproduced accurately by the ranking calculated on the basis of the total utilities. With around 70 percent, the attribute “picture” exerts the main impact on the perception of similarity, followed by “general layout” (10.56 to 12.58 percent), “advertising topic,” and “language.” That is, a variation of the picture (e.g., from No. 1 to No. 4) contributes most to a variation in the perception of similarity between two advertisements. This suggests that in print advertising, the perception of standardization depends primarily on the variation of the criterion “picture.” In comparison, all other attributes play a minor role in forming perceptions of similarity.

In this context, the fact that differences in perception between the countries seem to be minor is striking. In all three countries, the picture plays the dominant role in the perception of similarity, while the other elements of the advertisement are not as important. The German respondents seem to pay a little more attention to theme of the advertisement than the Dutch or French. Furthermore, the language plays a somewhat larger role in France than in the other two countries (10.07 percent relative importance against 7.87 percent and 8.15 percent). However,
TABLE 2
Aggregated Estimation Results from the Conjoint Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th>France</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Picture</td>
<td>70.86%</td>
<td>72.34%</td>
<td>73.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Layout</td>
<td>10.97%</td>
<td>12.58%</td>
<td>10.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising Topic</td>
<td>10.30%</td>
<td>6.93%</td>
<td>6.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>7.87%</td>
<td>8.15%</td>
<td>10.07%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The estimation of the part-worth was ascertained with the statistical program SPSS.

An analysis of the position of the four advertisement pairs in the multidimensional space allows a conclusion to be drawn with respect to the two dimensions. In terms of the first dimension, it is conspicuous that advertisements D and F display a frontal view of the BMW, while advertisements B and H show the car from a half-frontal perspective, and advertisements C and G show a side view of the BMW. Thus, one dimension can be interpreted as "position of the main object." For the second dimension, advertisements B and H display the picture with the darkest background color, while the backgrounds of advertisements A and E are lighter and more colorful. Therefore, the second dimension can be interpreted as "background color."

Thus, according to the multidimensional scaling, the picture plays by far the most significant role in determining perceptions of similarity. This outcome corresponds well with the results of the conjoint analysis, where the picture also was identified as the dominant attribute for the perceived similarity of the advertisement pairs. Regarding the interpretation of the results, it is evident that groups are formed consisting of two advertisements each. While the distance within each group is small, the distances between the groups are quite large. This leads to the conclusion that the two advertisements grouping together are perceived as being very similar. The common attribute of the pairs of advertisements grouping together is the use of the same picture. Thus, it is always the advertisements with the same picture that the respondents perceive as being very similar.

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**Figure 1** Results of the Multidimensional Scaling Analysis for Germany*

*The multidimensional scaling analysis was conducted with the statistical program SPSS.*
ments. The conclusion emerging from the joint application of the two multivariate methods is that, from the students’ perspectives, the most important determinant of a standardized advertisement campaign is the use of the same picture. All other elements play a minor role in determining perceptions of similarity. Consciously or unconsciously, respondents seem to take mainly the visual aspects into consideration when evaluating the similarity of print advertising. For a practitioner, this outcome implies that, in a standardized campaign, the most important factor is that visual aspects be identical. With respect to other elements of an advertisement, country-specific modifications can be made without destroying the standardized character of a campaign. Hence, by using the same visual elements in an international campaign, it is perceived as standardized from a student’s point of view, and it is thus possible to avoid image confusion and irritation that can be caused by localized campaigns.

Another significant finding from this study is the fact that the results of the conjoint analysis and the multidimensional scaling in the three examined countries are almost congruent. Major differences in perception among the three countries were not identified. Thus, the conclusions drawn above, with respect to the advertisements used, can be applied to all countries in this study. In all three countries, the visual elements are vital to perceptions of standardization. These perceptual similarities thus enable an advertiser to create an advertising campaign that is perceived as standardized by the target group of international advertising, here, students, in several countries.

**DISCUSSION**

This article represents only an initial approach to answering the question on which elements determine standardization from a consumer perspective. The study demonstrates a methodology by which the attributes of an advertisement determining the perception of standardization can be extracted. We have also shown that the influence of those attributes on perceived levels of standardization is likely to be similar across countries.

However, despite the insights derived from the study, the estimation results should not be generalized excessively for a number of reasons. First of all, the research has only been undertaken in three countries; therefore, it does not seem possible to generalize these results worldwide. Furthermore, with 72 students in each country, the number of respondents is relatively small, and, because only students were questioned, the results are certainly not representative of the population of a country as a whole. Also, within the framework of this study, it was not possible to identify whether additional factors, such as the advertised product, influence the perception of similarity. Estimation results may also have been distorted by the choice of experimental design. For instance, the dominant size of the picture is likely to have played a role in deriving a high level of significance for this factor in terms of similarity perception. With respect to conjoint analysis, effects resulting from different numbers of levels for the individual attributes also accompany the problem referred to above. These effects can lead to an involuntary domination of attributes with more levels, e.g., the criterion “picture” with four levels as opposed to only two levels for the other attributes in the study (Perrey, 1996). With respect to the multidimensional scaling, the validity of the results obtained is generally difficult to evaluate. However, research undertaken in this field offers promising results concerning the validity of multidimensional scaling outcomes (Dichtl and Schobert, 1979; Malhotra, 1987).

**Directions for further research**

First of all, additional empirical work to support our findings would be useful. This implies a need for more surveys with more respondents in numerous additional countries. These surveys should then also include other target groups of international advertising, apart from students. It is also advisable to extend the study to other continents beyond Europe. Furthermore, it is necessary to use additional sets of advertisements. Because it is conceivable that other variables (e.g., product, advertising medium, size of the advertisement, etc.) are responsible for significant variations in the results of the multidimensional scaling and conjoint analysis, studies should be undertaken to confirm the existence—or perhaps the non-existence—of such variables. If they can be identified, a classification of advertisements may be possible, in which the most important dimensions relevant to perception in each class could be established.

Furthermore, using the outcome of this research, the existing scoring models could be refined (Whitelock and Chung,
For instance, using data on relative importance derived from the conjoint analysis could refine the weightings of these models. If the existence of advertisement classes could be confirmed, scoring models for each class could be constructed with universally valid attributes and weights within each class.

Our model and study merely provide a basis for a more objective, consumer-oriented model for identifying those attributes that exert the most significant influence on perceived standardization in international advertising. Nevertheless, this study constitutes a promising foundation for an objective distinction between standardized and nonstandardized advertisements. This differentiation would then also provide practitioners with a more reliable basis for making decisions on the standardization or localization of international advertising campaigns.

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