

The CALA 2020 Proceedings Paper 16 - 5

*Language in Real and Virtual Spaces, Paper 5*

**Advertising Appeals in Baby Formula Commercials  
across Cultures**

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# Advertising Appeals in Baby Formula Commercials across Cultures

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## Abstract

Advertising, as a means of social communication, is seen as a reflection of cultural values, so does baby formula commercials. Advertising appeals, including both emotional and rational appeals, are an important strategy for advertisers to create effective commercials. This cross-cultural study compared the types of advertising appeals used in baby formula commercials of China, America, and Malaysia. It further investigated whether advertising appeals were related to the cultural values of these three countries using the Hofstede model, specifically individualism-collectivism. A comparative content analysis was used in this study. A total of 16 TV commercials on the same baby formula brand, S-26 Progress Gold, were identified and analyzed. The findings illustrated that advertisers tailor their advertising appeals, even in emotional appeals, different focuses of appeals are highlighted, to establish connections with their target customers in the global contexts.

**Keywords:** Advertising appeals, baby formula commercials, across cultures, individualism, collectivism.

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## Introduction

Advertisements are seen as a reflection of the prominent cultural values of countries (Hong, Muderriaoglu, and Zinkhan, 1987; Lamoreaux, 2008). Baby formula commercials are no exception. Advertising appeals are the top priority of advertisers or marketers, as they are closely linked to advertising effectiveness (Zhang et al., 2014). Advertising appeals can be divided into rational appeals and emotional appeals (Chen, Chang, and Gong, 2015; Cheong, Kim, and Zheng, 2010; Hornik, Ofir, and Rachamim, 2017; H. Zhang et al., 2014; Verma, 2009; Stafford and Day, 1995). Rational appeals are applied when advertisers stimulate intended customers' reasonable and rational ways of thinking and thus making (re)purchases, underling functions of certain brands or products (Johar and Joseph Sirgy, 1991; Hornik et al., 2017; Albers-Miller and Stafford, 1999). Emotional appeals are "grounded in the emotional, experiential side of consumption" (Albers-Miller and Stafford, 1999, p.44). Advertisers rely on building affective or personal perceptions of products or brands, including positive and negative emotions such as humor, pride, joy, guilt, fear, nostalgia, love and sympathy (Albers-Miller and Stafford, 1999). Besides, Pollay's 42 appeals (1983) has contributed a lot to measure the cultural values of advertising strategy.

Plenty of previous studies have suggested that advertising appeals may be adapted according to target customers' cultural values across cultures (Cheong et al., 2010; Beck, C. S., 2009; Wei and Jiang, 2005; Lin, 2001), which

may involve modifying the whole advertisement contents (Sidiropoulou, 2008). To analyze the relationship between cultural values and advertising appeals, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010; Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede, 2001), particularly individualism-collectivism, have been adopted (Mortimer and Grierson, 2010).

It is noteworthy that when applying Hofstede’s cultural dimensions into examining the relationship between advertising appeals and cultural values, more than two countries should be compared, whereas most studies did not (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010; Chang et al., 2007). Scanty studies have explored advertising appeals of the same brand in the Chinese, American, and Malaysian contexts. Thus, this study aims to fill up this gap by examining the commercials of the same baby formula brand S-26 Progress Gold in these three countries, using the Hofstede model, specifically individualism-collectivism.

## Methodology

A comparative content analysis was used in this study. The inclusion criteria included one baby formula brand that was widely accepted in the global markets, as its commercials may be more effective. Thus, S-26 was selected as it was one of the two American baby formula brands according to “Netherlands 50 Top Brand Values 2019 Ranking” (2020). And, S-26 ranked relatively higher than the other. Among 15 series formula of S-26, S-26 Progress Gold (for children 1-3 years) was selected due to its larger target audience, as health sectors recommend exclusive breastfeeding of children at least 6 months (Alnasser et al., 2018). Thus, S-26 Progress Gold baby formula was a good example to examine advertising appeals across cultures to satisfy the intended consumers’ cultural values. A total of 16 TV commercials (TVCs) on S-26 Progress Gold were identified and downloaded from youtube.com and youku.com. It is noteworthy that as Malaysia is a multiracial country with several languages, only the commercials in English were included in the samples.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Hofstede’s cultural dimensions*

As stated before, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010; Greet Hofstede, 2001) as shown below in Table 1, have been frequently used by scholars to analyze cultural values across cultures. It can be seen that the individualism indexes are dramatically different from the U.S. and China, as well as between the U.S. and Malaysia, with the index disparities of 71 and 65 respectively. The individualism indexes of China and Malaysia are quite similar, ranking 20 and 26 respectively. According to Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010), individualism-collectivism can be defined as “people looking after themselves and their immediate family only, versus people belonging to in-groups that look after them in exchange for loyalty” (p.89). Thus, individualism-collectivism was chosen from the five Hofstede’s cultural dimensions as the focus to analyze advertising appeals, which may provide more implications (Cheong et al., 2010).

Cultural Dimensions	China	U.S.	Malaysia
Individualism Index (IDV)	20	91	26
Power Distance (PDI)	80	40	104
Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)	30	46	36
Masculinity Index (MAS)	66	62	50
Long-term Orientation (LTO)	87	29	41

Table 1: Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions  
Source: Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010).

### *Prominent features of these commercials*

From these commercials(as shown in table 2), some prominent features can be figured out through comparisons between these three countries. For example, Chinese commercials on S-26 Progress Gold baby formula highlighted frequent use of celebrities, with singer Zhang Xueyou and actor Huang Lei as endorsers. American commercials preferred to depict a series of impressive characters--Tala, Khaled, Etem, Anna, and Daniel, with a drama-like style. Malaysian commercials emphasized learning and nutrition--children can be the expected person by parents if they drink S-26 Progress Gold baby formula(e.g. "nourish early learning 1, 2, 3"). It is noteworthy that Chinese commercials of this brand also introduced important foreign technology, important nutrition for babies' brain development, sphingomyelin, and foreign expert in the white suit, Dr. Nicholas from Wyeth (commercial titled "important discovery of parenting and technology"). Also, Chinese commercials advertised two Wyeth brands together, Wyeth S-26 Progress Ultima and Progress Gold (commercial titled "Wyeth S-26 Progress Ultima and Progress Gold").

Countries	China	U.S.	Malaysia
Titles of TVCs	First day in kindergarten (Singer Zhang Xueyou)	Brain nutrition for little leaders (Tala)	Nourish early learning 1
	Expectations for daughter (Actor Huang Lei)	Brain nutrition for little explorers (Khaled)	Nourish early learning 2
	Parent-child talent show (Singer Zhang Xueyou)	Brain nutrition for little explorers (Etem)	Nourish early learning 3
	Wyeth S-26 Progress Ultima and Progress Gold	Brain nutrition for little thinker (Anna)	How to get the ship out of a barrel
	An important discovery of parenting and technology	Brain nutrition for a curious learner (Daniel)	Cultivate children's learning potential
	-	-	Think quick, learn fast

Table 2 Titles of Chinese, American, and Malaysian TVCs on S-26 Progress Gold

### *Emotional appeals of these commercials*

Emotional appeals were utilized by advertisers of this brand in these three countries, excluding Chinese commercials titled "important discovery of parenting and technology" and "Wyeth S-26 Progress Ultima and Progress Gold." However, in Hofstede's individualism-collectivism model and Pollay's (1983) description of 42 appeals, the focuses of appeals have been different across countries.

In the individualism of Hofstede's model, people are expected to behave uniquely and vary from situations(De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010). It can be seen from the American commercials of this brand, they depicted independent, distinctive, and confident characters (Pollay,1983) in their commercials. Kids who have drunk this formula will become more intelligent as it has unique nutrition for their brain development. For example, Tala, a born leader, likes taking charge. She dragged her mother's trousers to indicate that the water sprinkler was out of work. Khalad/Etem, a little explorer, even dared to go outside at night to experience adventure with an electric torch. Daniel, a curious learner, is always trying to dismantle toys after observing what adults do. Anna, a little thinker, sat alone in the yard and observed her surroundings. She even let a bird free from a cage.

In contrast, in the collectivism of Hofstede's model, the self is closely related to the surroundings and the ideal self "vary by social role"(De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010, p.91). Thus, it can be seen from both the Chinese and Malaysian commercials of this brand, they highlighted affiliation, community, and family (Pollay,1983).

For example, in the Chinese commercial titled “the first day in kindergarten,” the father (singer Zhang Xueyou as endorser) brought his son to see the wonderland of learning and playing. However, the father had to take his son back to drink the S-26 Progress Gold formula to be more intelligent and strong. Then, the boy went back to kindergarten and performed well with other children. Similarly, in the Malaysian commercials, a boy was practicing playing baseball in his yard with his mother around. He tied the baseball to the pottery jar to prevent it from flying around. His mother applauded for him, thinking of the S-26 progress gold formula he has drunk. He became a champion in baseball when he has grown up. The similar scene happens at school in a commercial titled “how to get the ship out of a barrel.”

### *Rational appeals of these commercials*

Different from American and Malaysian commercials of this brand, Chinese marketers utilized more rational appeals. As in commercials titled “important discovery of parenting and technology” and “Wyeth S-26 Progress Ultima and Progress Gold,” they just tell the “facts” or “truth” about this formula in a logical and clear way—with unique nutrition for brain development, indicating that it is a good choice for parents. This, however, attributes to target customers’ distrust of the Chinese dairy industry (Gong and Jackson, 2013). Thus, advertisers underlined that the formula has been imported originally from foreign countries, and the technology is unique and useful for children’s brain development, to persuade their intended consumers. Also, the use of celebrities as endorsers in the Chinese baby formula commercials is related to collectivism, as “the function of a celebrity is to give a face to the brand in a world of brands with similar product attributes” (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010, p. 98).

## Conclusions

The findings illustrated that advertisers tailor their advertising appeals to establish connections with their target customers in the global contexts, even in a single brand. In particular, different focuses of emotional appeals are highlighted in the S-26 Progress Gold baby formula commercials of China, America, and Malaysia. All commercials but two Chinese ones in the study utilize emotional appeals. Hofstede’s model, specifically individualism-collectivism, can contribute to the cultural values of the adaptation of the S-26 Progress Gold baby formula commercials. However, it does exist some other factors, such as the far-reaching influence of Chinese customers’ distrust of their dairy industry. To examine the relationship between cultural values and advertising appeals across countries, future studies can be done in the following ways. Firstly, more samples of baby care brands, or other products, can be collected. Secondly, the other cultural dimensions in Hofstede’s model can be utilized, such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance.

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