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Assessing beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral responses toward online advertising in three countries

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ABSTRACT

The study is aimed to investigate the relationships among consumers' beliefs about online advertising, attitudes toward online advertising (ATOA), and consumer behavioral responses in three different nations. Among the major findings, (1) all five belief factors (i.e., information seeking, entertainment, economy, credibility, and value corruption) were statistically significant predictors of ATOA, which in turn, significantly predicted online ad clicking and frequency of online shopping, and (2) consumers' beliefs, attitudes and behavioral responses toward online advertising, and relationships thereof, varied across countries (i.e., the U.S., China, and Romania). Romanians had the most positive ATOA and were most likely to click on advertisements. Americans, however, made the most online purchases.

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As the Internet has increasingly become an integrated tool for marketing and advertising, the effectiveness of online advertising remains a crucial yet debatable issue among marketers and scholars. A host of studies (e.g., Ducoffe, 1996; Russell, Staffaroni, & Fox, 1994) have examined the mechanism of online advertising and suggested that individuals' attitudes toward online advertising (ATOA) serve as important indicators for online advertising effectiveness. Past research on online advertising has provided insight into global marketing and commerce. However, the foci of most studies have been on the U.S. or other developed countries. Little is known about online advertising in the emerging markets such as China and Romania.

Culture and advertising are intrinsically connected with each other. Cultural influence on consumers' beliefs and attitudes toward advertising has been well documented in the marketing literature (e.g., Durvasula & Lysonski, 2001; La Ferle, Edwards, & Lee, 2008). Nonetheless, to date, researchers have held different or even opposing views of online advertising in the global sphere. On one hand, the Internet has ipso facto served as a global medium, and such a nature supports the standardization approach to expanding businesses or organizations. On the other hand, it is argued that global reach does not equal global influence in regard to online advertising. Cultural differences are as relevant to online advertising as to traditional advertising (e.g., Roberts & Ko, 2001). Hence, it is of significance to examine consumers' beliefs and attitudes toward online advertising (ATOA) and their online behaviors in a cross-cultural context.

The present study proposes a model of online advertising based on the traditional advertising hierarchy model. However, due to the unique features of the Internet, consumers may develop beliefs and ATOA different than those developed in

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traditional media contexts. As Chaffee and Metzger (2001) commented, “new media bring challenges to our old models, as well as the occasion to reevaluate, extend, and perhaps even supersede them” (p. 378). Therefore, new belief factors are identified and added to the model. Furthermore, consumers’ behavioral responses indigenous to online advertising settings are included in the proposed model too.

The three chosen countries in this study represent different cultural orientations. The U.S. is a highly developed market and a typical Western culture that emphasizes individualism, masculinity, and a direct communication style. China and Romania, on the other hand, denote emerging markets that have been undergoing economic and sociocultural transformations. Both countries speak to collectivistic cultures. However, China represents a typical Eastern culture that is still poorly understood by the West, whereas Romanian culture has much in common with its Central and Eastern European neighbors (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001). These presumed differences in major cultural orientations warrant a comparison of online advertising among the three countries. Furthermore, compared with the rather mature online industry in the Western developed markets such as the U.S., online advertising in China and Romania is still in its infancy period. As such, findings from the current research may offer a new perspective on the evolving nature of online advertising.

Practically, to date, only limited data have been available for marketers to develop advertising strategy in the emerging markets, especially the Central and Eastern European countries such as Romania. This study provides valuable insights into consumers’ perceptions and attitudes toward online advertising in those markets. As such, the study may enhance marketing professionals’ understanding of online advertising audiences, and thus help businesses and organizations employ online advertising more effectively and efficiently in their global marketing endeavors.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: first, we review relevant literature on consumers’ beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral responses toward online advertising, as well as a brief introduction of the U.S., Chinese, and Romanian cultures; second, based on the literature review, hypotheses and research questions are proposed; third, we conducted structural equation modeling to examine the relationships among different variables; fourth, we present significant research results and discuss implications of those findings, as well as limitations and future research directions.

1. Literature review

1.1. Beliefs and attitudes toward online advertising

Consumers’ beliefs and attitudes toward advertising are important indicators of advertising effectiveness (Mehta, 2000). Presently, there exist two typical views about the relationship between consumers’ beliefs and their general attitudes toward advertising. The first treats the two constructs as equivalent and interchangeable, both conceptually and operationally (Mehta, 2000; Schlosser & Shavitt, 1999), whereas the second postulates that there are fundamental distinctions between beliefs and attitudes. Specifically, beliefs are specific statements describing the attributes or consequences of objects. Attitudes, on the other hand, are summative evaluations of objects. Emanating from beliefs, attitudes operate at different levels of cognitive abstraction. Similarly, one’s beliefs about advertising are antecedents of attitudes toward advertising (Brackett & Carr, 2001; Ducoffe, 1996; Pollay & Mittal, 1993). In this study, our model is built upon the second perspective. Beliefs about online advertising are descriptive statements about the attributes of online advertising (e.g., online advertising is entertaining). Attitudes toward online advertising are defined as the aggregation of evaluations of perceived attributes and benefits of online advertising (e.g., overall, I consider online advertising a good thing).

Consistently, researchers have argued that ATOA have both cognitive and affective antecedents (Ducoffe, 1996; Shimp, 1981). Belief about advertising, as a result of the benefit and cost that consumers derive from advertising, primarily serves as a cognitive predictor of ATOA. Moreover, one’s belief plays a more important role in forming ATOA when the person is engaged in central processing (i.e., more deliberate, effortful and thoughtful) advertising information than in peripheral processing (low involvement, less thoughtful, and more emotional) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Prior studies have demonstrated that one’s belief about advertising is a multidimensional construct. For instance, Bauer and Greyser (1968) identified two dimensions underlying consumers’ beliefs: economic and social. Later on, Pollay and Mittal’s model (1993) presented seven belief factors underlying consumers’ beliefs and classified those factors into two categories. The first category, labeled as personal use, consists of factors including product information, social role and image, and hedonic/pleasure. The second category, labeled as social effect, includes value corruption, falsity/no sense, good for the economy, and materialism.

Among the seven factors, *product information* describes advertising’s role as an important information purveyor, which contributes to marketplace efficiencies. *Social role and image* reflects the belief that advertising influences people’s lifestyle and formation of social status and image. *Hedonic/pleasure* refers to the view that advertising can be fun, pleasant and entertaining. *Good for the economy* reflects the viewpoint that advertising accelerates consumers’ adoption of new goods and technologies, fosters full employment, lowers the average cost of production, promotes healthy competition between producers, and raises the average standard of living (Belch & Belch, 2009). Notwithstanding its benefits for consumers and the whole society, advertising is often criticized for promoting materialism, corrupting values, and misleading audiences. Particularly, advertising is accused of providing people with unending razzle-dazzle of high-end products and preoccupying consumers with commercial concerns at the expense of social, political, philosophical, and cultural scruples. As a carrier of cultural and social values, advertising can contradict or even compromise the values that a society cherishes.

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