

**POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF INTERNATIONAL ADVERTISING STANDARDISATION
IN THE MERCOSUR**

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of international advertising standardisation practices in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, the Mercosur member countries. It is the first in its field to address local managers in Latin America with a self-administered questionnaire and analyses aspects of international advertising standardisation that have not – or not sufficiently – been studied yet: the extent of regional advertising standardisation, the rationality and irrationality of the standardisation decision, and the extent of standardisation at different advertising strategic levels. The study is also pioneering as it infers the extent of standardisation by comparing local advertising practices as described by local managers.

Keywords: International Advertising Standardisation, Mercosur

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Background: The standardisation debate

The origin of the standardisation debate in marketing and advertising has been traced back to the 1920s, when David L. Brown, an advertising manager at Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, stated that humanity possessed certain common attributes and that therefore it would be not only possible to standardise advertisements across countries but also logical (Brown 1923, as cited by Agrawal 1995). Many others came after Brown, but the everlasting standardisation debate was set off mainly by three authors who proposed standardisation as the only way to succeed in international marketing even if they did not add sound empirical evidence to their propositions: Elinder (1961; 1965), Fatt (1967) and Levitt (1983). Empirical evidence did come, though, from authors supporting localisationⁱ and the “contingency approach” (Agrawal 1995) as the middle-of-the-road optionⁱⁱ. Nowadays – as Buzzell (1968) already recognised at an early stage of this debate – the generalised opinion among academics and practitioners is that the question is not *whether or not* to standardise but *what or how much* to standardise.

Past Research on International Advertising Standardisation

A review of the literature resulted in 33 previous studies in the international marketing and standardisation field that dealt with standardisation issues from 1967 to date (for an overview see appendix A). The analysis brought four patterns to light.

Analysis of Standardisation Based on Managers Perceptions of Similarity between National Campaigns

All studies analysed explore IAS issues by asking respondents to compare national advertising practices between two (or more) countries. This approach has the advantage of being easy to carry out but bears the risk of having respondents comparing campaigns with varying degrees of precision depending on their knowledge of foreign campaigns – when local managers are surveyed – or on their imprecise detailed knowledge of local realities (Dunn 1976) – when headquarters (HQ) managers are surveyed. In order to offset this disadvantage, this study uses a new approach and asks local subsidiary managers to assess only their own local campaigns –about which they know best– in order to ensure a higher degree of accuracy of responses. The assessment of campaign similarity or dissimilarity is carried out ex-post by the researchers based on the described local practices.

Predominance of HQ Market Practices as a Frame of Reference for Standardisation

With one exception, all studies analysed use, implicitly or explicitly, a standardisation definition which refers to “... the degree of similarity in the marketing policies and practices of an international firm between its home country ... and a host country (or region...)” (Boddewyn and Grosse 1995, p. 27). As a consequence, IAS has largely been analysed as a phenomenon that must involve HQ market practices, an approach that does not account for the existence of standardised advertising between countries or within regions beyond the HQ market. The exception is Harris’ (1994) study of standardisation of advertising executions in the European Community, where the author analyses European practices of European and non-European companies only within Europe. The study proposed here analyses IAS in the Mercosur both in relation to and independently of HQ practices in order to allow for a broader spectrum of possibilities.

Neglect of Latin America in IAS Research

The majority of standardisation research is focused on the USA and Europe even if in the last few years a number of studies on Asian countries have also been published (Tai 1997; Samiee *et al.* 2003). The neglect of Latin America in IAS research is reflected in the fact that only three studies out of 33 analysed focus on Latin American countries: Brandt and Hulbert's (1977) study of Brazilian subsidiary managers as well as Grosse and Zinn's (1991) and Chhabra's (1996) studies of U.S. HQ managers in charge of this region. In order to shed more light into this geographic region, this study focuses on the Mercosur countries. As a way to ensure the best possible reflection of local realities, it further takes the local manager perspective and includes MNCs with HQ in Latin America into the sample.

Undifferentiated view of Advertising Standardisation

Another characteristic of international advertising and marketing standardisation studies is their tendency to analyse IAS as a variable without subdivisions. Only four out of 33 studies divide IAS into strategic and executional aspects (Killough 1978; Hill and James 1990/1991, Chhabra 1996, and Duncan and Ramaprasad 1995), and only one further study (Synodinos, Keown and Jacobs 1989) uses a more detailed classification by comparing budget-setting methods, timing of expenditures, allocation of media, measures of advertising effectiveness and creative approaches in 15 countries. The study proposed here is the first to analyse the standardisation of advertising strategy in a comprehensive manner which includes brand positioning, advertising objectives, target group, budget decisions, media decisions, brand benefits, reasons-why and advertising tonality in the analysis).

As a consequence of the above discussion, the study proposed here makes a contribution to the body of knowledge by i) inferring the extent of IAS based on the analysis of local practices, ii) adopting a subsidiary managers perspective, iii) including not only US and

European MNCs into the analysis but also Latin American companies, iv) carrying out a comprehensive analysis of advertising strategic elements, and finally v) focusing on the Mercosur countries in Latin America, an under-researched geographic region of the world.

The Mercosur (Mercado Común del Sur, Common Market of the South) is a regional economic integration zone in South America that counts Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay as steady members (Coffey 1998) and is an interesting object of study because of both economic and cultural aspects. As a major economic block with a GDP of nearly 640,000 mill. US\$ and a population of 224m inhabitants (Worldbank, 2005), the Mercosur is comparable with other geographic areas covered in previous studies in the field. The economic integration process that started in 1996 makes the Mercosur an attractive object of study, as economic integration has been considered as likely to influence standardised marketing activities (Boddewyn, Soehl and Picard 1986; Sriram and Gopalakrishna 1991). From a cultural point of view, the Mercosur is also an interesting object of study as it is more homogenous than the EU, the subject of many standardisation studies (e.g., Terpsta 1967; Harris 1994; Boddewyn, and Grosse 1995, etc.). The Mercosur countries were colonised and thus strongly influenced by only two European cultures – the Portuguese and the Spanish – and this cultural proximity of its member countries may be seen as creating a certain propensity for standardised marketing and advertising activities.

Research questions

Based on the research objectives and the existing literature, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: Is IAS a company policy for MNCs in the Mercosur?

RQ2: Are MNCs in the Mercosur rather standardising or localising their advertising?

- RQ3: Are standardising MNCs in the Mercosur pursuing standardisation specifically within or independently of the Mercosur boundaries?
- RQ4: What is the extent of standardisation of advertising strategy in the Mercosur divided into: brand positioning, advertising objectives, target group, budget decisions, media decisions, brand benefits, reasons-why and advertising tonality?
- RQ5: How important is each of the following drivers in “triggering” the advertising standardisation decision: a) a similar environment (i.e. consumer or market similarities), b) the organisation itself (i.e. economies of scale in advertising creation and production as well as better coordination of international marketing activities), c) the message (i.e. great national advertising ideas with potential for transference), d) hype or bandwagon effect?

Research methodology

A survey was considered to be the most suitable research method as it allows the gathering of data on a broad basis. A questionnaire was designed to address local key decision makers at MNCs operating in the Mercosur, including those MNCs based in the region.

Developing countries present special difficulties for cross-cultural marketing research (Malhotra, Agarwal and Peterson 1996), a proposition confirmed by the fact that none of the 33 studies analysed was based on a written survey of Latin American managers. In order learn more about the special problems involved in marketing research on this region of the world, the authors decided to contact experts in the field with research experience on Latin America – both in and outside of Latin Americaⁱⁱⁱ. None of the responding experts knew of any published study in the field based on a written survey of Latin American managers. The Latin American academics did not know of any local studies based on written manager surveys

either and expected the response rate to be extremely low as, in their opinion, Latin American managers would not reply to a survey unless they knew the person conducting it personally.

Based on the importance of personal bonds for obtaining responses, the authors decided to discard the original idea of using a ranking of the largest MNCs in Latin America (AméricaEconomía, 2004) as a sampling frame.

Instead, the decision was made to seek the support of local universities in order to contact current and former executive students, i.e., managers pursuing a part-time MBA degree or executive courses. In doing so, the lack of personal contact with these managers was bridged by the existing relationship between them and their universities^{iv}. The universities forwarded an e-mail prepared by the authors to their current and former executive students in which the recipients were asked to fill in the questionnaire online if they were a key-decision maker in regard to international advertising decisions. Otherwise, they were asked to forward the e-mail to the appropriate person in their organisation. Key-decision makers were identified as likely to be CEOs, Marketing/Commercial Directors or Senior Marketing/Advertising Managers.

A first wave of approx. 1,200 e-mails in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay^v at the end of April led to 164 usable responses. A precise response rate is, however, not calculable as not all e-mailed persons were in a position to answer the questionnaire, either because their companies operated only at local level, or because of their positions –unrelated with marketing decisions– in their companies. The lack of control of these variables by the researchers was seen as a trade-off for having the chance to use the highly important personal contacts with the receivers as well as reaching a substantially larger number of companies.

Preliminary results

The results presented here are the outcome of a preliminary analysis as the study is still under way and, most importantly, as the Portuguese questionnaire for Brazil has only just been launched.

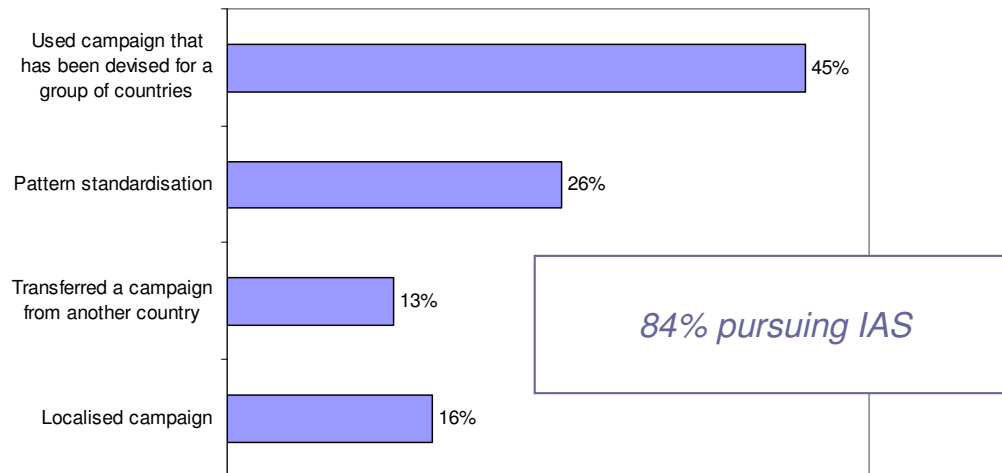
The majority of respondents so far are based in Argentina (74%), followed by Uruguay (18%). Distribution according to product type shows consumer goods as the main group in terms of business activity (51%), followed by services (31%) and industrial goods (15%)^{vi}. This strong representation of consumer goods and services is positive for the validity of results given that advertising measures tend to be more important for these categories than for industrial goods. Distribution according to the respondents' position is also very satisfactory as almost 2/3 of respondents are either CEOs or Marketing Directors. Furthermore, the distribution according to HQ base shows that 34% of the companies have their HQ in Mercosur countries. The expectation is that these data will allow conclusions to be drawn on the advertising practices of MNCs with HQs outside the developed world.

A look at the extent of IAS (FIGURE 1) shows that the great majority of respondents at this stage (84%) are pursuing IAS to some extent. The fact that 71% are either using a truly international campaign or devising local campaigns according to internationally pre-defined parameters ("pattern standardisation") appears to give support for the proposition that companies have made IAS a company policy (RQ1) and are therefore truly committed to IAS policies in the Mercosur.

The analysis of standardisation of advertising strategic elements is carried out by looking at those companies pursuing pattern standardisation (n=42), i.e., pre-defining advertising parameters internationally, so that local campaign developments will take them into account. A look at this group shows that the great majority of its members are standardising

positioning statements (90%) followed by brand benefits (45%), advertising tonality (30%) and reason-why (24%).

FIGURE 1: Extent of International Advertising Standardisation in the Mercosur



Respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagrees; 7 = strongly agrees) on seven variables extracted from the literature as responsible for causing IAS. TABLE 1 shows these variables in a ranked order according to the means obtained for all answers. These results appear to show that the triggers for the IAS decision are most often related to company factors (economies of scale in advertising creation and production as well as organisational efficiencies through a better coordination of international marketing activities) rather than to the environment (convergence of consumer needs and market conditions). Interestingly, companies that are **not** pursuing IAS (TABLE 2) state that “lack of convergence of market conditions” is the most important reason for them not to standardise advertising.

TABLE 1: Reasons why companies standardising advertising pursue IAS

Variable	MEAN
Economies of scale in advertising creation and production	5,52
Organisational efficiencies through a better coordination of international marketing activities	5,38
Enhancing advertising efficiency	4,87
Exploiting great national advertising ideas in other countries	4,50
Convergence of consumer needs	4,17
Success of IAS for other companies	4,09
Convergence of market conditions	4,02

TABLE 2: Reasons why companies not standardising advertising are not pursuing IAS

Variable	MEAN
Lack of convergence of market conditions	4,74
Only beneficial for certain product categories	4,70
Lack of convergence of consumer needs	4,63
In order not to diminish advertising efficiency	4,04

As stated above, these results can only be regarded as preliminary in nature. However, the expectation is that within the next few months, a larger result basis (including Brazil) will enrich these results so that a more detailed analysis can be presented at the conference.

Limitations

Given that the study presented here has not been completed yet, the authors would like to point out that this is a work-in-progress paper and that therefore an analysis of validity issues in terms of response, e.g. different number of responses by country, could not be carried out yet. These issues will be dealt with once data collection in Brazil has been finalised.

Additionally, 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 brought to light by this study. However, the decision to accept these limitations in research design was consciously made in order to allow a

higher response rate from managers in this rather unexplored geographic area in terms of marketing and advertising standardisation issues.

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Appendix A: Analysed standardisation studies

Empirical studies on the extent of international marketing and advertising standardisation (1967-2003)

Author	Year	Respondents based at HQ and/or SUBSIDIARIES (SUB)	Standardisation practices evaluated with respect to HQ, regionally or globally.	Differentiated analysis of advertising strategy and execution	Focus on Latin American/Mercosur countries
Terpstra	1967	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Donnelly and Ryans	1969	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Donnelly	1970	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Kacker	1972	HQ + SUB	HQ	NO	NO
Ward	1973	SUB	HQ	NO	NO
Dunn and Yorke	1974	HQ	n.A. (standardisation practices were not assessed)	NO	NO
Sorenson, Wiechmann	1975	HQ + SUB	HQ	NO	NO
Dunn	1976	HQ + SUB	HQ	NO	NO
Ryans and Fry	1976	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Brandt, Hulbert	1977	SUB	HQ	NO	YES
Boddewyn and Hansen	1977	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Wills and Ryans	1977	HQ	n.A. (standardisation practices were not assessed)	NO	NO
Killough	1978	HQ	HQ	buying proposal vs. creative context	NO
Michel	1979	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Weichmann, Pringle	1979	HQ + SUB	n.A.	NO	NO
Boddewyn, Soehl, Picard	1986	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Hite and Fraser	1988	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Kirpalani, Laroche and Darmon	1988	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Synodinos, Keown and Jacobs	1989	SUB (and local companies)	n.A. (respondents were only asked about local practices)	partially	NO
Hill and James	1990, 1991	HQ + SUB	HQ	sales platform vs. creative context	NO
Akaah	1991	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Grosse, Zinn	1991	HQ	HQ	NO	YES
Ozomer, Bodur, Cavusgil	1991	SUB	HQ	NO	NO
Kanso	1992	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Sandler, Shani	1992	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Harris	1994	HQ	REGIONAL	n.a. (only executions)	NO
Duncan and Ramaprasad	1995	n.A. (advertising agencies)	GLOBAL	strategy, execution, language	NO
Boddewyn and Grosse	1995	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Chhabra	1996	HQ	HQ	NO	YES
Tai	1997	HQ + SUB	HQ	NO	NO
Laroche <i>et al.</i>	2001	HQ	HQ	NO	NO
Kanso and Nelson	2002	SUB	HQ	NO	NO
Samiee <i>et al.</i>	2003	SUB	HQ	NO	NO

ⁱ Cf Douglas and Wind 1987; Wiechmann 1974; Wind, Douglas and Perlmutter 1973; Martenson 1987, Mueller 1987; Onkvisit and Shaw 1987; Kanso and Nelson 2002; Kotler 1986; Kanso 1992; Amine and Cavusgil 1983; Tai 1997; Taylor, Hoy, Haley 1996; Ricks, Arpan and Fu 1974.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Buzzell 1968; Britt 1974; Sheth 1972; Harris 1996, 1994a; De Chernatony, Halliburton, and Bernath 1995; Kernan and Damzel 1993; Halliburton and Hünérberg 1987; Meffert and Bolz 1998; Waltermann 1989; Peebles, Ryans and Vernon 1977; Donnelly and Ryans 1969; Dunn 1976; Whitelock and Chung 1989; Kanso 1991; Terpstra and Sarathy 2000.

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^{iv} Up to date, the following universities have supported the study: Universidad Austral (IAE) and Universidad Torcuato di Tella (both Argentina), Universidad ORT and Universidad de Montevideo (both Uruguay), and Universidad Católica (Paraguay). Further institutions have agreed to help in due course: Universidad de San Andrés and Universidad de Buenos Aires (Argentina), Universidad Católica (Uruguay).

^v The study has not been launched in Brazil yet. However, the Portuguese questionnaire is ready now and will be put online in the next few days.

^{vi} The 3% difference to 100% represents companies with combined activities.