

Exploring The Media Strategy For International Marketers With Small Budgets: A Cross-Country Consumer Perspective

Zhihong Gao, (E-mail: zgao@rider.edu), Rider University
Cynthia M. Newman, (E-mail: cnewman@rider.edu), Rider University

ABSTRACT

This paper reports a cross-country comparative study of the media choices for the marketing of Master of Business Administration education in China and the United States from a consumer perspective. To date, limited discussion in the standardization versus adaptation debate has focused specifically on the issue of media strategy from the perspective of a specific category of international marketers, even though media planning is often the most costly and challenging part of international marketing communication. The current study is an effort to bridge this gap.

INTRODUCTION

International marketers usually have three basic options in their marketing communication: standardization, adaptation, or a middle ground between the extremes. Each approach is associated with a specific set of benefits and risks; scholars in the field are still debating which approach is relatively superior. Meanwhile, new trends in globalization, including the emergence of global market segments, the expansion of global media companies, and the rapid spread of new technology such as the Internet, are providing new opportunities for companies to standardize their marketing communication when targeting consumers in different countries.

Admittedly, only a limited number of large multinational companies are furnished with a handsome media budget and thus enjoy considerable flexibility in global media buying. In contrast, many international marketers have a rather small media budget. In such a case, a couple of questions arise: What media strategy should these marketers adopt in their international marketing communication? How should they take advantage of the new media opportunities? And would standardization be a plausible option for them to effectively reach their target markets around the globe?

To date, very limited discussion in the standardization versus adaptation debate has focused specifically on the issue of media strategy from the perspective of a specific category of international marketers, even though media planning is often the most costly and challenging part of international marketing communication. As an effort to bridge this empirical gap, this paper reports a cross-country comparative study of the media choices for the marketing of Master of Business Administration (MBA) education in China and the United States from a consumer perspective.

The paper is organized into five sections. First, the relevant literature is reviewed and the research questions and hypotheses are presented. Then, following an introduction to research methodology, the research results are reported with respect to hypotheses. Next, the findings are discussed and their implications explored in the context of the standardization versus adaptation debate. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary and suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Standardization versus Adaptation Approach to International Marketing

It is more than half a century ago that scholars and practitioners began to engage in serious debate on whether international marketers should standardize or adapt their communication while marketing to consumers in different countries (for review, see Agrawal, 1995; Ryans, Griffin, and White, 2003). Today, the debate is still going on – in fact, it represents one of the major preoccupations of scholars in the field (Samiee and Jeong, 1994). Meanwhile, the world has undergone significant changes over the years and especially during the last two decades. Notably, an array of factors, including the end of the Cold War, the hastened pace of globalization, the rapid spread of new technologies, and the rising prominence of new economies, all have made today's world dramatically different from the one which served as the backdrop of the initial debate on standardization vs. adaptation.

Onkvisit & Shaw (1999) identify three positions in the debate: the pro-standardization school, the pro-adaptation school, and the contingency school. The arguments for the standardization approach often dwell upon its potential benefits: it is efficient, convenient, and saves money for the marketer; it allows a multinational company to maintain a consistent brand image around the world (Elinder, 1965; Fatt, 1967; Levitt, 1983). Supporters of the adaptation approach invariably quote the various insurmountable differences between world markets and contend that only by adapting the message to the local context can marketing communication be effective (Britt, 1974; Kotler, 1986; Rustogi, Hensel, and Burgers, 1996; Watering, Pruyun, and Waarts, 1996). The contingency school takes a middle ground and emphasizes that the appropriateness of standardization is situation-specific and depends on product category, consumer characteristics, and environmental factors (Harris, 1996; Harris and Attour, 2003; Ryans and Ratz, 1987). Embracing such a standpoint, theoretical frameworks have been proposed where standardization and adaptation are perceived as the polar ends on a continuum of varied degrees of adaptation (Laroche et al., 2001; Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos, 1997).

To a great extent, the three perspectives in the standardization vs. adaptation debate are not as irreconcilable as they seem to be. Rather, the debate in its essence represents the dilemma “between what is theoretically desirable and what is practically possible” (Agrawal, 1995, p. 26). Apparently, no one would dispute the desirability of the standardization approach for international marketers, though the feasibility and effectiveness of such an approach are the primary focus of contention by its opponents. What the contingency school tries to achieve is to provide a technical solution to the issue by focusing on specifics, which is wise and consistent with the situation-specific nature of international marketing.

The effectiveness of the standardization approach to international marketing communication is contingent upon a number of factors, including product category, media infrastructure, and corporate characteristics (Duncan and Ramaprasad, 1995; Mueller, 1991; Solberg, 2002). For such a reason, rather than categorically studying “international marketing” per se, research in the field may need to become more specific in focus, making a specific product category the unit of investigation and corporate resources a factor in the discussion. The study presented in this paper intends to explore research in such a direction.

The Development of International Media

Varied local media conditions have been cited as one of the major obstacles to standardized international marketing communication (Kotler, 1986; Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos, 1997; Ryans and Ratz, 1987). However, the rapid development of international media in recent years and particularly the wide spread of the Internet around the world seem to offer international marketers new opportunities to overcome the media obstacle and reach across national borders.

The landscape of international media has undergone tremendous transformation in the last decade. First, new technologies such as the Internet, digital television, and mobile phones have experienced rapid growth worldwide and seriously challenged the dominance of traditional media in marketing communication (Saxe, 2000; Bowman, 2003; Hille, 2003). The popularity of the Internet, the fastest growing technology in human history, lies in

its interactivity, as consumers can easily control how and when media content is accessed (“Analyst speak,” 2003). In addition, because of its virtual nature, the Internet can easily transcend geographic and national boundaries, which often restrict the reach of traditional media.

The last decade has also witnessed the rapid growth of global media, as multinational media companies extend their reach around the world through mergers and consolidations (McChesney and Herman, 1996). For example, News Corporation owns operations in filmed entertainment, television, cable network programming, satellite television, magazines, newspapers, and book publishing in the United States, Continental Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, Asia, and the Pacific Basin (News Corp., 2004). *Elle*, one of the leading fashion magazines in the West, publishes local editions in 15 countries around the globe (*Elle*, 2004). Undoubtedly, the emergence and expansion of global media considerably facilitate media buying by international marketers and make a standardized approach to international marketing more feasible than before. Yet, their high advertising rates make these global media out of the reach of marketers with limited budgets.

The fast development of new media in recent years is not confined to Western, developed countries but plays out with equal force in the emerging economies as well. For instance, China had more than 90 million cable subscribers, 30 million regular users of the internet, and a quarter of a million Chinese web sites by 2000 (“New media,” 2001). The Chinese now can receive dozens of outside television channels by satellite, including Chinese language services of CNN and Star TV (“The Chinese media,” 1997). In addition, many traditional Western media companies have entered the Chinese market. For example, Western magazines such as *Business Week*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Elle*, and *Cosmopolitan* have launched their Chinese issues in the country (“Fortune or folly,” 1996; Crellin, 1998). Media content producers such as Warner Brothers and Walt Disney also initiated cooperation programs with Chinese partners (Button, 1993; “Disney goes,” 1997).

Despite the fact that many media markets around the world have invariably experienced significant development in the last decade, it is still too early to assume that the international media market has become consistently homogeneous and ready to provide a one-fits-all solution for international marketers. Rather, determined by a spectrum of economic, social, and historical factors, local media markets still boast strong idiosyncrasies, which tend to frustrate international marketers’ attempt to standardize their media strategy (“Challenges,” 2004; Smith, 2000).

Table 1 compares some of the most recent economic and communications indices of China and the United States. It is obvious that China’s huge population, low per capita income, and comparatively low literacy rate present themselves as constraints on the development of the Chinese media, so that its major media indices are far below those of the United States. On the other hand, if one focuses on media indices in major Chinese cities, it seems that China is quickly catching up with its Western counterparts. For example, 264 million Chinese homes owned a television set by 1999, which means a penetration rate of 90% nationwide and 100% in cities (“New media,” 2001). With 130 million cell phone users, China was reported to exceed the United States in cell phone ownership in 2001 (Robertson, 2001).

In summary, the recent development of international media holds two diverging implications for international marketers. On the one hand, the increasing penetration of new media around the world and the expansion of global media in new markets make the standardized approach to international marketing communication more feasible than ever. On the other hand, due to the rapid multiplication of media outlets, the local media market has become increasingly fragmented, and, overloaded with media options, consumers are more elusive to target (Mandese, 2004). Facing these conflicting trends, an effective *and* efficient media strategy becomes crucial to the success of international marketing communication. This is particularly true for marketers with small budgets.

Presumably, the first step in developing an effective international media strategy starts from understanding the media consumption patterns of the target markets in different countries. More specifically, where do consumers in different markets search for information when making their purchase decisions? What are their media preferences when marketed to? Are their preferences homogeneous enough to warrant a standardized media

platform for international marketing communication? The remainder of the paper will use the marketing of MBA education in China and the United States as a case study to investigate these questions.

Table 1: Economic and Communications Indices of China and the United States
(Source: Development Data Group, World Bank (2004))

| | China | United States |
|---|----------|---------------|
| Population (millions, 2002) | 1,281.D | 288.4 |
| Urban Population (% , 2002) | 37.6 | 77.7 |
| Adult Literacy Rate (% Ages 15 and over, 2002) | 86.4 | n/a |
| GNI per capita (PPP, \$, 2002) | 4,390 | 35,060.0 |
| Telephone Mainlines (per 1000 people, 2001) | 137 | 667.0 |
| Telephone Mainlines in Largest City (per 1000 people, 2001) | 584 | n/a |
| Mobile Phones (per 1000 people, 2001) | 110 | 451.0 |
| Daily Newspapers (per 1000 people, 2001) | 42(1995) | 213.0 |
| Radios (per 1000 people, 2001) | 339 | 2,117.0 |
| Television Sets (per 1000 people, 2001) | 312 | 835 |
| Personal Computers (per 1000 people, 2001) | 19.D | 625.0 |
| Internet Users (thousands, 2001) | 33,700.D | 142,823.D |

MBA Education in China and the United States

Management education in the socialist China was nonexistent until the early 1990's, when China's deepened economic reform gave rise to increasing demand for modern management personnel. The Chinese government gave approval to nine Chinese universities to offer MBA programs on a trial basis in 1991. Since then, the development of Chinese MBA education has been accelerating. By 2001, approximately 62 Chinese universities located in 27 provinces and autonomous cities established MBA programs, and more than 50,000 students had graduated from these programs in the last ten years (Xia and Niu, 2001). In 2002, 30 Chinese universities started to offer Executive MBA programs. Meanwhile, MBA programs overseas are also exploring the Chinese market for opportunities ("International MBA," 2001). Nowadays, facing increasing competition, Chinese MBA programs, historically inexperienced in actively marketing themselves, have to intensify their marketing efforts to recruit prospective students.

According to *Petersons* (2004), there are at least 325 institutions offering general MBA degrees in the United States; there are approximately 125 Executive MBA programs (Mansfield, 1996). Economic conditions at the turn of this century contributed to nationwide increases in applications at most US MBA programs (Merritt, 2002; Silverman, 2002). These one to two year programs have "evolved over the last 40 years" to currently have an emphasis on "leadership, teamwork, and communication skills along with the traditional areas" of business (Haight and Kwong, 1999, p. 33).

The general age of US MBA program applicants has increased over the last 20 years: most GMAT takers in 2000-2001 were 28 to 30 years old, as compared to 1982-1983 when the largest number of GMAT takers were in the range of 22 to 23 years old (Silverman, 2002). However, MBA programs are now "reaching out to younger students in an effort to diversify their classes and attract fresh graduates before they become established in other careers" (Silverman, 2002, p. B1). Applicants to US MBA programs are evaluated on their GMAT test scores as well as their past academic performance, work experience, and personal qualities and presentation (Lundquist, 2004). In their marketing efforts, US MBA programs are not just targeting domestic prospective students but also are seeking to attract candidates from overseas either to their domestic programs or to their programs offered, at least partially, overseas (Mansfield, 1996; Woods, 2000).

The International Marketing of MBA Education

Higher educational institutions around the world – particularly those in Western developed countries -- are no strangers to international marketing. In fact, they have actively participated in, as well as benefited enormously from, the process of globalization. For instance, from 1995 to 1999, the number of international students increased by 8.2% in the United States, 34.1% in Australia, and 11.7% in Britain (“US still preferred,” 2002). Some 586, 000 international students attended American universities in 2003 and contributed more than \$11 billion to the American economy (Schemo, 2004). Business management is the most popular area of study among international students, who constitute between 30% and 40% of most classes at the top business schools (Dunham, 2002).

Given its sizeable economic benefit, international education has increasingly evolved into a large service export industry and witnessed intensified market competition (Calleja, 2000; “Europe ‘losing out’ to USA,” 2001). In such a context, it becomes imperative for international higher educational establishments and especially MBA programs to adopt a marketing orientation and reach their target market through sophisticated marketing communications (Gutman and Miaoulis, 2003; Mazzarol and Soutar, 1999). Meanwhile, it is equally imperative to recognize that higher educational institutions have limited resources and must rely on cost-efficient media to deliver their marketing messages. In order to identify the effective *and* cost-efficient media, the first step is to understand where prospective MBA students usually search for information.

Nicholls, et al. (1995) characterize MBA education as a people-based service, the marketing of which involves “the selling of an expensive product (in terms of both money and time), significant brand differences and infrequent buying” (p. 35). For such reasons, its prospective customers tend to face a complex buying situation involving an extensive process of information search (Driscoll and Wicks, 1998; Nicholls et al., 1995; Srikatanyoo and Gnoth, 2002). During this process, the customer will gather information from a variety of sources (Merritt, 1996; Policano, 2001).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

In the context of China and the United States, given the differences between the two media markets, the following research questions emerge:

- Research Question 1:** Do the prospective MBA students in China and the United States rely on a similar media mix when searching for information about MBA programs?
- Research Question 2:** What are the media preferences of the prospective MBA students in China and the United States when receiving marketing communications from MBA programs?
- Research Question 3:** Are the media preferences of the prospective MBA students in China and the United States homogeneous enough to warrant a standardized media platform for the marketing communications of MBA programs?

The MBA market can be segmented into three smaller homogeneous groups: “before starting their careers, when planning to move from junior to middle management, or when aspiring to change from middle management to senior positions” (Nicholls et al., 1995, p. 36). Meanwhile, the attributes of MBA education as a service cover four aspects: product (degree offerings, facilities, accreditations, reputation, etc.), price (tuitions and fees, financial aids, etc.), place (campus location, setting, etc.), and people (student body, faculty qualifications, etc.) (Gomes and Murphy, 2003; Nicholls et al., 1995). Since the current study’s respondents from China and the United States all belong to the first segment, presumably they have similar needs when pursuing MBA programs:

Hypothesis 1: The Chinese and US prospective MBA students use similar criteria to evaluate MBA programs.

Not surprisingly, in the age of the Internet, the study by Gomes and Murphy (2003) reveals that over half of the prospective students surveyed in Hong Kong rely on the Internet as the primary medium to search for information about overseas schools. Johnston and Shanley (2000) also highlight the importance of the Internet in the college search process in the United States. Thus,

Hypothesis 2: The Internet is a popular source of information for both the Chinese and American prospective MBA students.

Hypothesis 3: Email is preferred over telephone and mail by both the Chinese and American prospective MBA students when communicating directly with MBA programs.

Gomes and Murphy (2003) note that trusting the information source is an important factor for high-involvement information search. Thus,

Hypothesis 4: Both the Chinese and US prospective MBA students prefer less intrusive and more information-intensive media such as websites, catalogues, and brochures when MBA programs respond to their inquiry for information.

Hypothesis 5: Authoritative information sources such as college guides and career placement office at undergraduate institution are more likely to be consulted by both the Chinese and US prospective MBA students for information about MBA programs.

The United States is a well-developed market economy, and American consumers are long used to timely and satisfactory customer service from marketers. In comparison, China is a fairly new market economy, where customer-oriented services have just begun to gain popularity.

Hypothesis 6: Prospective MBA students in the United States expect quicker responses by MBA programs to their information inquiries than their Chinese counterparts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study used a survey instrument to collect information from the respondents. The questionnaire contains nine questions and covers four major topics, including the perceived importance of various criteria in evaluating MBA programs, sources of information to be consulted during the information search process and their perceived importance, preferences concerning various communication channels and media, and expectations concerning institution responsiveness to inquiries (see Appendix A). At the very beginning of the survey, the respondent is also asked to indicate his/her interest in pursuing MBA study in the near future.

The English version of the survey was first developed and pre-tested. Then, a native Chinese speaker translated the English survey into Chinese, which was translated back into English by a different Chinese speaker who was unaware of the original English survey. Discrepancies between the English translation and the original survey were resolved through discussions and revisions of the Chinese translation.

The respondents for the study consisted of 67 Chinese undergraduate global business students studying at a private, residential university in an east coast city of China and 71 American undergraduate business students studying at an accredited suburban, residential university in the Northeast of the United States. Both universities have an enrollment of between 3,000 and 4,000 students. These two sets of respondents were appropriate for the current study to the extent that they represent a segment of the MBA education market (Nicholls et al., 1995) and there is a new trend among MBA programs to recruit those who recently completed their undergraduate business education (Silverman, 2002).

The survey was administered to the two sets of students in person by the researchers in the spring of 2004. The American students received bonus points as an incentive for completing the survey; the Chinese students received no incentives. While 73.1% of the Chinese and 81.7% of the American respondents reported being at least somewhat interested in pursuing MBA education at the time of the survey, all respondents were instructed to complete the survey under the assumption that they were considering MBA study.

The collected data were analyzed using Chi-square and, in the case of importance ratings, also one-way ANOVA. In the following section, the results of the statistical analyses will be reported with a focus on the hypotheses developed and presented earlier.

RESULTS

The statistical results partially support Hypothesis 1 that the Chinese and US prospective MBA students use similar criteria to evaluate MBA programs (see Table 2). Of the thirteen criteria covered by the survey question, six criteria, namely, campus setting, degree programs and offerings, enrollment (headcount), faculty to student ratio, stated mission, and technological capabilities, receive a similar number of responses at each importance level from both groups.

The two groups' responses differ significantly when it comes to criteria such as accreditation, financial aid, average test scores of new students, campus location, qualifications of faculty, ranking by external bodies, and tuition and fee level (see Table 2). Specifically, more US respondents (37.1%) than Chinese respondents (9.5%) rate financial aid extremely important (Chi-Square = 19.436, $p = .001$). Similarly, 49.3% of US respondents rate tuition and fees extremely important while only 7.5% of Chinese respondents see it the same way (Chi-Square = 33.520, $p = .000$). Also, more US respondents (55.1%) than Chinese respondents (15.4%) rate campus location as either very important or extremely important (Chi-Square = 37.259, $p = .000$). In contrast, 65.2% of Chinese respondents versus 39.1% of US respondents rate accreditation as an extremely important criterion (Chi-Square = 13.407, $p = .009$), 21.2% of Chinese respondents versus 5.9% of US respondents rate average test scores as an extremely important criterion (Chi-Square = 24.294, $p = .000$), 70.1% of Chinese respondents versus 36.6% of US respondents rate faculty qualifications as an extremely important criterion (Chi-Square = 17.200, $p = .002$), and 51.5% of Chinese respondents versus 21.1% of US respondents rate ranking by external bodies as an extremely important criterion (Chi-Square = 18.897, $p = .001$).

Table 2: Differences in Evaluative Criteria between Chinese and US Respondents

| Evaluative Factor | F- value (significance, df) | Chinese Mean Rating | US Mean Rating |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Campus setting | .768 (.382, 1) | 3.09 | 3.25 |
| Degree & program offerings | 1.308 (.255, 1) | 4.21 | 4.90 |
| Enrollment (headcount) | .387 (.535, 1) | 2.65 | 2.76 |
| Faculty to student ratio | 1.747 (.188, 1) | 3.67 | 3.44 |
| Stated mission | 1.735 (.190, 1) | 3.62 | 2.97 |
| Technological capabilities | 2.312 (.131, 1) | 3.78 | 4.00 |
| Accreditation | 11.63 (.001, 1) | 4.55 | 4.04 |
| Financial aid | 15.98 (.000, 1) | 3.13 | 3.91 |
| Average test scores of new students | 28.66 (.000, 1) | 3.82 | 2.96 |
| Campus location | 42.44 (.000, 1) | 2.60 | 3.65 |
| Qualifications of faculty | 17.56 (.000, 1) | 4.64 | 4.08 |
| Ranking by external bodies | 20.75 (.000, 1) | 4.32 | 3.59 |
| Tuition and fee level | 30.30 (.000, 1) | 3.15 | 4.11 |

Nevertheless, judged by their mean ratings of evaluation criteria, both groups considered accreditation (Chinese mean = 4.55; US mean = 4.04), degree programs and offerings (Chinese mean = 4.21; US mean = 4.90), and faculty qualifications (Chinese mean = 4.64; US mean = 4.08) somewhere between very important and extremely important.

The data suggest that the Internet is a very important source of information about MBA programs for both Chinese and US respondents, thus fully supporting Hypothesis 2. Of the eleven information sources listed in the survey, the Internet is selected as a likely source of information by the largest percentage of both US (79%) and Chinese (91%) respondents. Few respondents from either country consider billboards, cable television, network/national television, radio, magazines, movie theaters, and posters likely channels to obtain information about MBA programs (see Table 3).

Table 3 Likely Media Sources to Be Consulted During the Information Search Process

| Information Source | Chinese that would consult (% , n) | US that would consult (% , n) | Pearson Chi-square value (significance) |
|--|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Billboards | 9.0 (6) | 5.6 (4) | .566 (.452) |
| Cable television | 9.0 (6) | 2.8 (2) | 2.38 (.123) |
| Career placement office at undergraduate institution | 34.3 (23) | 65.7 (46) | 13.49 (.000) |
| College guide | 55.2 (37) | 74.6 (53) | 5.73 (.017) |
| Internet | 91.0 (61) | 78.9 (56) | 3.96 (.047) |
| Magazine | 29.9 (20) | 21.1 (15) | 1.39 (.239) |
| Movie theater placements | 0 | 1.4 (1) | .951 (.330) |
| Network television | 20.9 (14) | 4.2 (3) | 8.87 (.003) |
| Newspaper | 58.2 (39) | 18.3 (13) | 23.369 (.000) |
| Posters | 6.0 (4) | 5.6 (4) | .007 (.933) |
| Radio | 16.4 (11) | 1.4 (1) | 9.781 (.002) |

Hypothesis 5, which predicted that college guide and career placement office at undergraduate institution are more likely to be consulted by both Chinese and US prospective MBA students, is only partially supported (see Table 3). 74.6% of US respondents consider college guides, and 65.7% consider the undergraduate career placement office, to be potential sources of information, while, respectively, 55.2% (Chi-Square = 5.733, $p = .017$) and 34.3% (Chi-Square = 13.490, $p = .000$) of Chinese respondents share the same view about the two sources. In comparison, more than half of Chinese respondents (58.2%) see newspaper as a likely source of information; however, only 18.3% of US respondents do (Chi-Square = 23.369, $p = .000$).

In terms of importance ratings, the Internet is ranked third out of ten possible sources of information by US respondents (mean = 3.80), following career placement office (mean = 3.94) and college guide (mean = 3.89). Similarly, for the Chinese respondents, college guides (mean = 4.06) is the most important source, and the Internet and career placement office share second place, with a mean of 3.85. For both groups, the least important sources based on mean ratings are magazines, newspapers, posters at undergraduate institutions, and unsolicited direct mail (see Table 4). The two groups are slightly different in their rating of open house ($F = 6.461$, $p = .012$) and graduate school fair ($F = 5.353$, $p = .022$). Their attitude toward unsolicited direct mail is significantly different ($F = 14.179$, $p = .000$), with the US respondents rating the source higher than their Chinese counterparts.

When it came to communicating directly with MBA programs, some interesting results emerge from the data. When asked about the preferred way to contact MBA programs, a large percentage of Chinese respondents (56.7%) prefer telephone, and almost half of US respondents (47.8%) prefer email, among the three options of email, telephone and mail. Mail is the least preferred means of communication for both groups. When asked about the preferred way for MBA programs to respond to their inquiry, though relatively more Chinese prefer phone and more Americans prefer email, the difference between the two groups is too small to be statistically significant. Roughly 40% of both Chinese and American respondents choose email as their first choice (Chi-Square = 2.106, $p = .551$). Such results partially support Hypothesis 3, which predicts that email is preferred by both Chinese and American prospective MBA students when communicating directly with MBA programs.

Table 4: Importance of Information Sources Consulted During Search Process

| Information Source | F- value (significance, df) | Chinese Mean Rating | US Mean Rating |
|---|-----------------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Career placement office at undergraduate institution(s) | .149 (.701, 1) | 3.85 | 3.94 |
| College guide | .080 (.778, 1) | 4.06 | 3.89 |
| Open house | 6.461 (.012, 1) | 3.14 | 3.59 |
| Graduate school fair | 5.353 (.022, 1) | 3.83 | 3.39 |
| Institution-specific website | .073 (.787, 1) | 3.56 | 3.51 |
| Internet | .081 (.777, 1) | 3.85 | 3.80 |
| Magazine | .035 (.852, 1) | 2.97 | 2.90 |
| Newspaper | .656 (.419, 1) | 2.78 | 3.30 |
| Posters at undergraduate institution | 1.445 (.231, 1) | 2.94 | 2.70 |
| Unsolicited direct mail | 14.178 (.000, 1) | 2.00 | 2.65 |

Hypothesis 4 is supported by the data to the extent that both Chinese and US prospective MBA students prefer less intrusive and more information-intensive media such as websites, catalogues, and brochures when receiving responses from MBA programs about their inquiry (see Table 5). These media can be received at one's home and reviewed at one's leisure. Postcards, general letters, and general emails, though not highly intrusive, are least information-intensive and are not embraced warmly by the respondents from either country. Telephone calls either from a current MBA student, a faculty member or the graduate admissions office, information-intensive as they may be, are also highly intrusive. Thus, they only receive a moderate level of interest on the part of respondents from both countries: less than 50% of respondents from each group indicate a preference for each of these methods, though the Chinese show more interest than the American respondents. Personalized communications, both in the form of emails and letters, are preferred by respondents in both countries over general communications. Open house invitations interest respondents from both countries. Despite the overall similarities, there are some significant between-country differences. Notably, the Chinese are less enthusiastic about receiving letters, including personalized letters, than their American counterparts (26.9% vs. 52.1% for personalized letter, Chi-Square = 9.17, p = .002). Meanwhile, they are more enthusiastic about receiving referral to MBA websites (50.7% vs. 28.2%, Chi-Square = 7.38, p = .007) than American respondents.

Table 5: Preferred Response to Information Inquiry about MBA Programs

| Nature of Response | Chinese that would prefer the response (% , n) | US that would prefer the response (% , n) | Pearson Chi-square value (significance) |
|--|--|---|---|
| Brochure(s) | 58.2 (39) | 77.5 (55) | 5.88 (.015) |
| Catalog | 61.2 (41) | 74.6 (53) | 3.56 (.169) |
| General email | 19.4 (13) | 22.5 (16) | 1.232 (.540) |
| Personalized email | 58.2 (39) | 42.3 (30) | 4.94 (.084) |
| General letter | 7.5 (5) | 19.7 (14) | 4.36 (.037) |
| Personalized letter | 26.9 (18) | 52.1 (37) | 9.17 (.002) |
| Open house invitation(s) | 55.2 (37) | 70.4 (50) | 4.11 (.128) |
| Phone call from current MBA student | 32.8 (22) | 21.1 (15) | 2.41 (.121) |
| Phone call from faculty | 43.3 (29) | 23.9 (17) | 5.80 (.016) |
| Phone call from graduate admissions office | 47.8 (32) | 35.2 (25) | 2.24 (.135) |
| Postcard(s) | 3.0 (2) | 15.5 (11) | 6.32 (.012) |
| Referral to website | 50.7 (34) | 28.2 (20) | 7.38 (.007) |

Hypothesis 6 is negated by the research results. Surprisingly, contrary to the hypothesis that American prospective students expect quicker responses from MBA programs, it is the Chinese respondents who hold a higher expectation: 70% of Chinese respondents expect a response within 7 days, as compared to only 24% of US respondents with the same expectation (Chi-Square = 45.877 , p = .000).

DISCUSSION

The findings of the current study indicate that there are considerable similarities as well as differences between Chinese and American prospective MBA students in their media preferences when searching for information about MBA programs. Most interesting of all, the Internet, together with email and websites, emerges as the favorite media option for the respondents of both countries, while traditional media such as television, magazine, radio, billboards, and posters are very unlikely to be consulted for information by either group. Similarly, both groups prefer less intrusive and more information-intensive marketing communications such as brochures and catalogs, and prefer personalized communications over general communications. On-campus career placement office, college guide, and the Internet are rated the top three most important sources of information by both groups, though the exact order differs slightly between the two.

A close look at the data reveals that the two groups face the same paradox in their media choice. On the one hand, both groups rate career placement office and college guide more important than, or at least as important as, the Internet as information sources about MBA programs. Yet, when asked about the likelihood of consulting these sources, the respondents from both countries equally prefer the Internet over the other two options. In fact, 91% of the Chinese students would turn to the Internet for information, while only 55.2% of them consider college guide and 34.3% of them consider career placement office as a likely sources of information. Such a paradox can be largely explained by the relative convenience and easy accessibility of the Internet compared to the other two sources. This is especially true in the case of China, where college guides are difficult to obtain and college career placement offices are rather bureaucratic establishments inherited from the socialist era, whose original function was to assign college graduates to jobs in state-owned organizations.

In a number of ways, the Chinese and American respondents differ in their media preferences when searching for information about MBA programs. Notably, more than half of the Chinese consider newspaper a likely source while only 18.3% of the Americans say so. Such a difference may be traced back to the fact that China, given its socialist roots and the function of newspaper reading in Chinese politics, has a strong tradition of institutional subscription and reading of newspapers, which elevates the status of the medium as an information channel. In comparison, career placement offices on American campuses have been a traditional establishment where students can go and obtain advice from friendly staff on career planning issues. For such a reason, 65.7% of the American respondents versus 34.3% of the Chinese consider a career placement office a likely source of information. Finally, more Chinese respondents prefer to receive referrals to MBA websites probably because they are comparatively less familiar with MBA programs and/or with using search engines to discover website addresses than their American counterparts.

It is necessary to note that communications such as open house invitation, catalog, brochure, and college guide have not been widely used by Chinese educational institutions in their marketing efforts and thus are quite foreign concepts to the Chinese respondents. Even so, the Chinese respondents show an interest in them almost as strong as that of their American counterparts. In such a light, it is reasonable to expect that the increased introduction of these communications to the Chinese will be accompanied by positive consumer reaction.

It is also important to point out that some of the differences found between the Chinese and American respondents, statistically significant as they are, should be applied with caution. For instance, though a higher percentage of the American respondents than the Chinese respondents prefer postcards as responses from MBA programs, the fact that only 15.5% of the Americans indicate such a preference should make invalid the conclusion that the two groups are different in their attitude toward postcards, or that postcards should be used to market to the Americans, not the Chinese. Rather, judged by their low percentage numbers, neither of the two groups is really enthusiastic about such an option.

Though considerable differences exist between the Chinese and American prospective students, it does not necessarily mean that a standardized media strategy is infeasible when marketing to these two groups. On the contrary, the converging trends in their media preferences present very encouraging news for international MBA programs. For these marketers, a standardized media strategy should use the Internet as the centerpiece of the media

mix, supplemented by consistent presence in college guides and long-term cooperation with career placement offices. If other media are to be used, then communications via those media should always feature the website of the MBA program. Of course, in the Chinese context, such a media strategy will involve more efforts on the part of the marketer to get started, including establishing contacts with career placement offices at Chinese universities, offering on-line informational sources for their staff, and advertising on Chinese educational websites.

If a standardized media strategy is indeed a potentially effective and efficient option, then the next obvious question is: Could MBA programs implement a standardized message strategy as well? Based on the findings of this study, the answer seems to be yes. It is true that the Chinese and US respondents differ in their ratings of some of the evaluative criteria. However, the proposed standardized media strategy relies on the Internet – more specifically, the program’s website – to deliver the primary marketing message, while the prospective students’ information search is intensive in nature. Thus, by providing a comprehensive set of information on the various evaluative criteria through its website, a MBA program may not only facilitate the decision making of the prospective students but also reduce the potential mismatch between the program and its applicants resulting from a lack of information.

Though the current study focuses on the international marketing of MBA programs, the conclusions drawn here hold significant implications for services of similar kinds, such as other educational institutions, tourist destinations, and medical institutions, which invariably offer high-involvement products to a niche market around the world, and whose prospective customer often undergoes an intensive information search. A possible media mix for these services would be the Internet combined with direct marketing to industry professionals in the local market, such as educators, travel agents, and medical service providers, who maintain direct and regular contact with the prospective customer.

CONCLUSION

The current study highlights the importance of the Internet in international marketing. The new medium, because of its interactive, convenient, and information-intensive nature, has emerged as a significant source of product information. From such a perspective, the Internet presents tremendous new opportunities to international marketers, especially those with limited resources who offer high-involvement products, to reach prospective customers worldwide. A media strategy with the Internet in the center and as the anchor of information has the potential of providing efficient standardized media solutions to international marketing communication.

Given the rapid growth of media outlets, it is true that the local media markets are becoming fragmented, and consumers are facing more media choices than ever. However, the findings of the current study suggest that, in searching for information about a specific product, consumers around the world tend to rely on a very similar and specific set of sources for information, and their media preferences are converging in a number of ways. Such a conclusion illuminates the product specific dimension of media strategy as well as marketing strategy. So, a plausible answer to the standardization versus adaptation question would be: “It all depends”. It depends on the product category, the target market, and the market condition. In the case of international MBA education marketing, based on the findings of the current study, it seems that a standardized media strategy is feasible.

A limitation of the current study lies in the fact that when surveyed, the respondents were not actively searching for information about MBA programs. So, the findings reflect not what they are actually doing but what they would reportedly do. Another limitation is that the respondents, college students, only represent one segment of the MBA education market and presumably the most homogeneous one. A large segment of the market consists of working people who seek a career change through an MBA degree. This group of prospective students may be much more diverse in their media consumption patterns. Further study needs to be conducted to track their media preferences.

The current study uses the international marketing of MBA education as an example to explore the possible international media strategy for marketers of similar caliber. To further this line of research, future studies may need to proceed in two complementary directions, either focusing on a specific product category and exploring the

optimal international media mix for that category, or focusing on a specific global market segment, such as youth or elite, and investigating their media consumption patterns.

REFERENCES

1. Agrawal, M. (1995). "Review of a 40-year debate in international advertising". *International Marketing Review*, 12(1), 26-48.
2. "Analyst speak: Gauging the degree of media consumption". (2003, February 6). *New Media Age*, P15.
3. Bowman, J. (2003, November 28). "TV gains at expense of print titles". *Media*, 35.
4. Britt, S. H. (1974). "Standardizing marketing for the international market". *Columbia Journal of World Business*, 9(4), 39.
5. Button, G. (1993, April 26). "Ads for the sets of China". *Forbes*, 151, 12-16.
6. Calleja, D. (2000). "The world at your door: International students bring diversity to the classroom and even a little extra tuition". *Canadian Business*, 73(20), 108.
7. "Challenges to EU integration". (2004). *Brand Strategy* (March), P.48.
8. The Chinese media: More autonomous and diverse – within limits. (1997). CIA Unclassified Briefing.
9. Crellin, M. (1998, July 16). "Young China welcomes West". *Marketing Week*, 21, 38-39.
10. Development Data Group, World Bank (2004).
11. "Disney goes media buying in China". (1997, May 9). *Campaign-London*, p. 38.
12. Driscoll, C. and Wicks, D. (1998). "The customer-driven approach in business education: A possible danger?" *Journal of Education for Business*, 74(1), 58-61.
13. Duncan, T. and Ramaprasad, J. (1995). "Standardized multinational advertising: The influencing factors". *Journal of Advertising*, 24(3), 55-68.
14. Dunham, K. J. (2002, December 17). "Foreign M.B.A.s find degree translates into fewer job offers". *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern edition), B4.
15. Elinder, E. (1965). "How international can European advertising be?" *Journal of Marketing*, 29(2), 7-11.
16. Elle (2004). www.elle.com
17. "Europe losing out to USA" in international education". (2001). *Education & Training*, 43(8/9), 461.
18. Fatt, A. C. (1967). "The danger of 'local' international advertising". *Journal of Marketing*, 31(1), 60-62.
19. "Fortune or folly". (1996, October 14). *Business China*, 22, 1-2.
20. Gomes, L. and Murphy, J. (2003). "An exploratory study of marketing international education online". *International Journal of Educational Management*, 17(2/3), 116-125.
21. Gutman, J. and Miaoulis, G. (2003). "Communication a quality position in service delivery: An application in higher education". *Managing Service Quality*, 13(2), 105-111.
22. Haight, G.T. and Kwong, K.K. (1999). "Future of the MBA in China". *Business Forum*, 24(1/2), 33-36.
23. Harris, G. (1996). "International advertising standardization: What do the multinationals actually standardize?" *Journal of International Marketing*, 2(4), 13-30.
24. Harris, G. and Attour, S. (2003). "The international advertising practices of multinational companies: A content analysis study". *European Journal of Marketing*, 37(1/2), 154-168.
25. Hille, A. (2003, December 12). "Print under threat as more top BDMs turn to internet, TV". *Media*, 5.
26. Johnston, J. and Shanley, M. (2000). *For Parents Only: Tips for Surviving the Journey from Homeroom to Dorm Room*. Hauppauge, New York: Barron's Educational Series.
27. Kotler, P. (1986). "Global standardization – Courting danger". *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 3(2), 13-15.
28. Kumar, V. and Nagpal, A. (2001). "Segmenting global markets: Look before you jump". *Marketing Research*, 13(1), 8-13.
29. Laroche, M. et al. (2001). "A model of advertising standardization in multinational corporations". *Journal of International Business Studies*, 32(2), 249-
30. Levitt, T. (1983). "The globalization of markets". *Harvard Business Review*, 1(3), 92-102.
31. Lundquist, S.T. (2004). "Getting admitted to MBA programs". www.petersons.com/GradChannel.
32. Mandese, J. (2004). "Media overload on the rise". *TelevisionWeek*, 23(20), 21.
33. Mansfield, D. (1996, January 29). "US business schools look to new markets overseas". *Marketing News*, 30(3), 8.

34. Mazzarol, T. and Soutar, G. N. (1999). "Sustainable competitive advantage for educational institutions: A suggested model". *International Journal of Educational Management*, 13(6), 287-?
35. McChesney, R. W. and Herman, E. S. (1996). *The global media: The new missionaries of corporate capitalism*. Herndon, VA: Cassell Academic.
36. Merritt, J. (1996, October 21). "Tour the campus without leaving home". *Business Week*, 3498, 157.
37. Mueller, B. (1991). "Multinational advertising: Factors influencing the standardized vs. specialized approach". *International Marketing Review*, 8(1), 7-18.
38. *New media in China: A strategic briefing*. (2001). Access Asia Limited.
39. News Corp. (2004). www.newsinc.com
40. Nicholls, J. et al. (1995). "Marketing higher education: The MBA experience". *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 9(2), 31-38.
41. Onkvisit, S. and Shaw, J. J. (1999). "Standardized international advertising: Some research issues and implications". *Journal of Advertising Research*, 39 (6), 19-24.
42. Papavassiliou, N. and Stathakopoulos, V. (1997). "Standardization versus adaptation of international advertising strategies: Toward a framework". *European Journal of Marketing*, 31(7), 504-527.
43. Parmar, A. (2002, October 28). "Global youth united". *Marketing News*, 36(22), p. 11+.
44. Petersons (2004). www.petersons.com/mba.
45. Policano, A.J. (2001). "Ten easy steps to a top-25 MBA program". *Selections*, 1(2), 39-40.
46. Robertson, J. (2001). "China to exceed U.S. in cell phone ownership this year". *EBN*, 1267, PG3.
47. Rustogi, H., Hensel, P. J., and Burgers, W. P. (1996). "The link between personal values and advertising appeals: Cross-cultural barriers to standardized global advertising". *Journal of Euro-Marketing*, 5(4), 57-79.
48. Ryans, J. K., Griffin, D. A., and White, D. S. (2003). "Standardization/adaptation of international marketing strategy: Necessary conditions for the advancement of knowledge". *International Marketing Review*, 20(6), 588-603.
49. Ryans, J. K. and Ratz, D. G. (1987). "Advertising standardization: A re-examination". *International Journal of Advertising*, 6, 145-158.
50. Samiee, S. and Jeong, I. (1994). "Cross-cultural research in advertising: An assessment of methodologies". *Academy of Marketing Science*, 22(3), 205-217.
51. Saxe, F. (2000). "Radio listening reaches 3-year low". *Billboard*, 112(33), 70.
52. Saxton, J. (2001). "The growth of the Internet, digital television and mobile telephony and the implications for not-for-profit marketing". *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 6(4), 347-363.
53. Schemo, D. J. (2004, February 26). "Decline seen in science applications from overseas". *New York Times*, A18.
54. Silverman, R.E. (2002, January 15). "Your career matters: Business schools seek new blood from colleges". *The Wall Street Journal*, B1.
55. Smith, K. A. (2000). "Effects of communication on economic and political development: A time series analysis". The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Conference.
56. Solberg, C. A. (2002). "The perennial issue of adaptation or standardization of international marketing communication: Organizational contingencies and performance". *Journal of International Marketing*, 10(3), 1-21.
57. Srikatanyoo, N. and Gnoth, J. (2002). "Country image and international tertiary education". *Journal of Brand Management*, 10(2), 139-146.
58. "Twenty years of Chinese advertising". (2001). Beijing: China Statistics Press.
59. "US still preferred destination of students". (2002, July 2). *BusinessWorld* (Manila), p. 1.
60. Wierenga, B., Pruyn, A. and Waarts, E. (1996). "The key to successful Euromarketing: Standardization or customization?" *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 8(3/4), 39-58.
61. Woods, L. (2000). "The worldly MBA: Business schools innovate to compete in growing worldwide market for MBAs". *Corporate Legal Times*, 10(101), 12-16.
62. Xia, Q. and Niu, J. (2001). MBA Wei zhongguo daili le shenmo [What does MBA bring to China]? <http://www.edu.cn/20011126/3011753.shtml>

APPENDIX A: PROSPECTIVE MBA STUDENT SURVEY

1. How likely are you to pursue an MBA degree in the future?

- Definitely
- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Not at all likely

Please complete the remainder of the survey with the assumption that you are considering MBA study.

2. How important would each of the following factors be in determining the MBA program(s) to which you would apply?

| | Extremely important | Very important | Important | Mildly important | Not at all important |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Accreditation(s)..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Availability of financial aid..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Average standardized test scores of new students..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Campus location..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Campus setting..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Degree/program offerings..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Diversity of student body..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Enrollment (headcount)..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Faculty to student ratio..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Percent of international students | <input type="radio"/> |
| Qualifications of faculty..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Ranking by external bodies..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Stated mission..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Technological capabilities..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Tuition & fee level..... | <input type="radio"/> |

3. Where are you most likely to search for information about MBA programs? (Mark all that apply.)

- Billboards
- Cable Television
- Career Placement Office at undergraduate institution
- College Guides (e.g., Peterson's)
- Internet
- Magazines
- Movie Theatre Placements
- Network Television
- Newspapers
- Posters
- Radio
- Other (please specify): _____

4. How quickly do you expect an MBA program to typically respond to your inquiry?

- Within 1 to 2 days
- Within 3 to 7 days
- Within 1 to 2 weeks
- Longer than 2 weeks
- Do not know

5. Rank the following communication channels to reflect your preference when you contact an MBA program for information. (1=most preferred)

- ____ E-mail
- ____ Mail
- ____ Telephone

6. Rank the following communication channels to reflect your preference when an MBA program responds to your inquiry for information. (1=most preferred)

- ____ E-mail
- ____ Mail
- ____ Telephone

7. What type of communication or material would you prefer to receive in response to your inquiry for information about an MBA program? (Mark all that apply.)

- Brochure(s)
- Catalog
- General e-mail
- Personalized e-mail
- General letter
- Personalized letter
- Open house invitation(s)
- Phone call from a current MBA student
- Phone call from faculty
- Phone call from graduate admissions office
- Postcard(s)
- Referral to website
- Other (specify): _____

8. Which, if any, of the following would you prefer to receive as unsolicited communications from MBA programs? (Mark all that apply.)

- Brochure(s)
- Catalog
- General e-mail
- Personalized e-mail
- General letter
- Personalized letter
- Prefer not to receive any unsolicited communications
- Open house invitation(s)
- Phone call
- Postcard(s)
- Other (specify): _____

9. How important would each of the following sources be during your active search for information about MBA programs?

| | Extremely important | Very important | Important | Mildly important | Not at all important |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Career Placement Office at your undergraduate institution..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| College guides..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| College open houses..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Graduate school fairs..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Institution-specific websites..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Internet..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Magazines (e.g., US News)..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Newspapers..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Posters at your undergraduate institution..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Unsolicited direct mail..... | <input type="radio"/> |
| Other (specify): _____ | <input type="radio"/> |

10. What is your current GPA?

- Less than 2.00
- 2.00 to 2.49
- 2.50 to 2.99
- 3.00 to 3.49
- 3.50 to 4.00

Thank you for your responses. Please be assured that your individual responses will be kept confidential.

NOTES