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Perceptions of Warmth and Competence Conveyed by Hard Sell and Soft Sell Voices: A Cross-Cultural Study

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ABSTRACT

We assess the reactions of Generation Z consumers to hard and soft sell vocal styles in two countries (France and New Zealand) to understand whether the association of warmth and competence personality traits differs across countries. Results reveal commonalities and differences that advertisers should take into consideration when designing advertising vocal strategies. In both countries, the soft sell vocal style conveyed significantly more warmth than the hard sell style. Our study also reveals differences between countries with French participants having a clear preference for soft sell voices, which they rated very high in both warmth and competence, whereas participants from New Zealand found the hard sell voices significantly more competent than French participants did.

Introduction

This study explores whether consumers' attitudes toward two advertising vocal delivery styles (hard sell and soft sell voices) vary across countries. Specifically, we assess Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers' judgements about the warmth and competence of these two vocal styles in order to understand whether these judgments are universal or country-dependent. Such a cross-cultural approach for study of advertising voices is extremely scarce. Indeed, most advertising voice studies are monocultural and scarcely acknowledge the potential impact of culture on their results; they tend to assume that their findings about advertising voice are universal; thus, they neglect, or fail to, conclude or suggest that their findings should only be considered wholly or mainly as valid in the location or culture within which the study was conducted. Such lacunae are all the more surprising given that there is a considerable amount of research to support the view that advertising and culture are intricately bound (De Mooij 2018; Lin 2001; Mueller 1996), that advertising is essentially "a cultural phenomenon, culturally inspired and created within the expectations of a culture" (Taylor, Hoy, and Haley 1996, 2), and that consumers' attitude toward advertising may differ between countries (Andrews, Lysonski, and Durvasula 1991; Dianoux, Linhart, and Vnouckova 2014; Lin 2001; Lysonski and Pollay 1990). There is also a small body of literature outside of advertising, within the field of psychology, suggesting that listeners' cultural background influences their assessment of voice quality and may affect the interpretation and perceived veracity of emotions or personality traits conveyed by the voice (Scherer 1972; Scherer, Banse, and Wallbott 2001; Waarama 2015; Waaramaa et al. 2021).

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Using a contrastive framework, we contribute to the cross-cultural denaturalization of advertising researchers' simplistic or ethnocentric assumption about the universality of advertising vocal specificities. In particular, we expand upon current research on soft sell and hard sell advertising appeals by delving into the realm of vocal expression because, curiously, scholarly investigations have largely overlooked the role of voice in these significant and distinct advertising appeals. This dearth of research leaves us with an incomplete understanding of how hard sell and soft sell advertising vocal delivery styles influence consumers' attitudes toward advertisements.

This study adopts a macro cultural approach to explore how consumers perceive the "vocal packages" characteristic of the hard and soft sell appeals. Unlike previous studies that isolated and manipulated micro elements of voice quality one by one—such as pitch, loudness, syllable speed, or intonation—we adopt a holistic perspective on advertising voices. Drawing from voice acting literature and expert guidance from voice professionals, we designed vocal packages that represent the typical *hard sell style* (fast, loud, high to mid pitch, and upbeat voice conveying energy, enthusiasm, and urgency) and *soft sell style* (slow, soft, low to mid pitch voice conveying a relaxed atmosphere and a sense of intimacy with the audience) and cross-culturally assessed consumers' perceptions of these packages. These typical and distinctive vocal packages are particularly well-suited to the macro framework of our cross-cultural study, which examines large-scale country patterns and consumers' holistic judgements about a voice's warmth and competence.

Our research focuses on the segment of young consumers, specifically Gen Z. They were selected for various reasons, including their increasing influence and purchasing power, as well as their ongoing participation in market activities that will continue for many years (Afterpay 2022; Mitrofanoff 2019; Pollard 2021). Insights from young consumers such as Gen Z, some of whom are moving into adulthood (Parker and Igielnik 2020), are also valuable for anticipating future market trends and communication strategies, including, we believe, in relation to advertising voice preference.

This study contributes to the advertising literature by suggesting that voice is an important aspect of hard sell and soft sell appeals that should not be overlooked in advertising studies, and by showing that the soft sell and hard sell vocal styles do contribute to conveying specific warmth and competence personality traits. Our results paint a profile of each vocal style across and within countries, which should be useful, not only as a basis for future research, but also for advertisers who look for guidance on which vocal style they should use for their brands, products, or services.

Literature review

Hard sell and soft sell appeals

Advertising research commonly categorizes advertising appeals into two approaches that offer distinct methods of communicating with audiences: hard sell and soft sell (see Beard 2004; Haygood 2016). *Hard sell* is typically characterized as an "aggressive, high-pressure sales tactics or promotion," whereas *soft sell* is defined as "a low-key sales approach that relies on gentle persuasion" (Ammer 2013). Okazaki, Mueller, and Taylor (2010a, 2010b) provide a comprehensive academic definition, describing *hard sell* as direct, explicit, rational, and information-based, aiming for quick sales, and *soft sell* as relying on indirect, image-based, emotional appeals. However, this type of definition, which solely focuses on visual aspects, leads most researchers to test image and word-based advertisements without considering the vocal characteristics of these appeals (Akbari 2015; Butt, Mukerji, and Shareef 2017; Okazaki, Mueller, and Diehl 2013; Okazaki, Mueller, and Taylor 2010a). Even Okazaki, Mueller, and Taylor's (2010b) extensive measurement method for soft sell and hard sell appeals overlooks the contribution of voice to these categories.

This oversight in scholarly literature regarding the role of voice in hard sell and soft sell appeals is counterbalanced by insights from voice acting professionals who actively discuss and describe these vocal styles. These professionals are very conscious of the power of voice to work

indexically in advertising. As Alburger (1999) noted, voice artists, in their role as storytellers and salespersons, must be "able to convey a wide range of attitudes, personality, delivery and emotions" (5) and play on such prosodic elements as pitch, intonation, "vocal range" (speed -or pacing-, rhythm) and "dynamic range" (attitude-the mind-set of the projected character-, volume-, or loudness/tone) (45). Voice professionals typically categorize delivery styles into "hard sell (fast and punchy) and soft sell (relaxed)" (Alburger 1999, 30). *Hard sell voices* are recurrently described as high to mid pitch, fast-paced, loud, excited, energetic, and insistent. They typically shout to convey energy, urgency, assertiveness, and enthusiasm and to prompt immediate action (Baker 2014; Expertvillage 2008a; Parachuk 2018; Shih 2020; Shires 2023; Terzza 2018a; Voiceovers.com 2024; Voices 2024). As Shires (2023) puts it, a hard sell voice is "comparable to an espresso shot; potent, brief and memorable." Conversely, voice professionals describe *soft sell voices* as low to mid pitch, slow-paced, soft, calm, suggestive, gentle, and friendly. These voices are more likely to whisper than shout, aiming to convey warmth and "allure," and to create a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere and a sense of intimacy with the audience. (Expertvillage 2008b; Parachuk 2018; Shih 2020; Shires 2023; Terzza 2018b; Voiceovers.com 2024; Voices 2024). As Shires (2023) puts it, a soft sell voice is "more like a gentle nudge than a push… it doesn't scream, it suggests, it doesn't push, it persuades." In the end, according to voice professionals, the distinction between hard sell and soft sell vocal styles therefore revolves around three main elements (as discussed later in text) that work in interaction and as a package: *speed*, *loudness*, and *pitch*.

Character traits conveyed by voice

Voice research spans multiple disciplines including communication, psychology, biology, and linguistics. Across these fields, voice and speech cues have long been recognized as crucial for forming interpersonal impressions based solely on a speaker's voice (Karpf 2006; Pittam 1987, 1994; Starkweather 1978). Studies reveal that voice communicates socially relevant information, shaping perceptions of personality traits such as "competence, extroversion, maturity, dominance, perceived intelligence, artistic ability, sophistication, pride, weakness and warmth" (Pittam 1994, 163), and can convey socioeconomic status (Avery and Liss 1996; Scherer 1979), hierarchical rank, and power dynamics in the workplace (Dunbar and Burgoon 2005; Ko, Sadler, and Galinsky 2015). Thus, voice serves as a significant marker of identity, imbuing communication with meaning through prosodic patterns and voice quality elements, such as speed, loudness, pitch, and intonation (Kreiman and Sidtis 2011; Laver 1994; Pittam 1994; Scherer 1979).

Studies have also revealed that certain voices are perceived as more attractive than others, impacting our impressions of individuals and shaping our social interactions (Imhof 2010; Surawski and Ossoff 2006; Zuckerman and Miyake 1993). Zuckerman and colleagues were among the first to demonstrate that people can reach a consensus on the attractiveness of voices, suggesting the existence of a vocal attractiveness stereotype. This phenomenon of *bias*, often referred to as the "what sounds beautiful is good" stereotype, leads us to make stereotypical assumptions based on various vocal cues and to associate positive personality traits with voices we find attractive. Consequently, individuals whom we consider as having attractive voices are often attributed socially favorable traits, such as competence, likability, conscientiousness, warmth, and honesty (Zuckerman, Hodgins, and Miyake 1990; Zuckerman, Miyake, and Elkin 1995; Zuckerman and Driver 1988).

Applying the stereotype content model to advertising vocal styles

In line with vocal attractiveness theory, our study explores how differently consumers from two countries are "attracted" to the hard sell and soft sell advertising vocal styles. Specifically, we investigate how these voices are characterized in terms of warmth and competence, two dimensions that are central to social psychology's Stereotype Content Model (SCM) (Fiske et al. 2002). This model posits that "perceived warmth and competence are the two universal dimensions of

human social cognition" (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007, 77) and that these dimensions are fundamental in how we perceive individuals and social groups (Abele et al. 2008; Abele and Bruckmüller 2014; Paulhus, Bruce, and Trapnell 1995). *Warmth* is described as being other-focused or service-oriented, indicating qualities such as being prosocial, cooperative, good-natured, benevolent, honest, trustworthy, friendly, helpful, or sincere. *Competence* is associated with achievement orientation and encompasses traits such as confidence, intelligence, skillfulness, capability, effectiveness, and having power or status (Abele and Wojciszke 2007; Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2008; Davvetas and Halkias 2019; Judd et al. 2005).

Warmth and competence in voice studies

Over the years, dimensions of competence and warmth (also termed *benevolence*) have been central to the methodology of several studies of voice, which have produced both consistent and conflicting results (Ball et al. 1982; Brown, Strong, and Rencher 1974; Ko, Judd, and Stapel 2009; McAleer, Todorov, and Belin 2014; Newcombe and Arnkoff 1979; Oleszkiewicz et al. 2017; Smith et al. 1975; Street, Brady, and Putman 1983; Wu et al. 2023). Research indicates that various elements such as voice pitch, speech rate, and speech style influence perceptions of warmth and competence. For instance, higher-pitch voices are often judged as warmer but less competent (Ko, Judd, and Stapel 2009; Oleszkiewicz et al. 2017; Wu et al. 2023) and lower-pitch voices are associated with greater competence but less warmth (Brown, Strong, and Rencher 1974; Klofstad, Anderson, and Peters 2012; Krahé, Uhlmann, and Herzberg 2021; Oleszkiewicz et al. 2017; Wu et al. 2023). Despite these trends, research findings are mixed especially when the gender of the voice is considered. Some studies find that a male low-pitch voice sounds more competent (Klofstad 2016; Ko, Judd, and Stapel 2009; Tsantani et al. 2016; Zuckerman, Hodgins, and Miyake 1990), whereas others suggest that it does not necessarily sound more competent (Chebat et al. 2007; Krahé, Uhlmann, and Herzberg 2021). Some studies find that male high-pitch voices are perceived as low in competence and warmth (benevolence) (Brown, Strong, and Rencher 1974) whereas other studies find that male high-pitch voices are perceived as warm (likeable) (Krahé, Uhlmann, and Herzberg 2021). Other research shows that raised-pitch voices were perceived as warmer than lower-pitch voices only for women (Oleszkiewicz et al. 2017) and that female higher-pitch voices sound more competent (Oksenberg, Coleman, and Cannell 1986). Research on speech style (use of tag questions, hedges, compound requests in speech) has also shown that female speakers are judged as warmer and more polite than male speakers (Newcombe and Arnkoff 1979).

Other research indicates that speaking rate affects perceptions of warmth and competence. Generally, faster speakers, regardless of gender, are perceived as more competent (Brown 1980; Brown, Strong, and Rencher 1973, 1974, 1975; Smith et al. 1975; Street, Brady, and Putman 1983; Zuckerman and Miyake 1993) but less warm (Brown, Strong, and Rencher 1973, 1974) compared with slower speakers. Some studies suggest that the highest ratings for warmth (benevolence) occur at a normal speech rate (neither too fast, nor too slow) (Smith et al. 1975). Additionally, speakers with moderate- to fast-speaking rates are perceived as more socially attractive (warm) than those with slower rates (Street, Brady, and Putman 1983).

Warmth and competence in marketing research

The dimensions of warmth and competence have been used in the marketing literature, particularly as the foundations for the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF) (Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012). Building on SCM, this line of research has explored how brands can be perceived by consumers along these two dimensions and how perceptions of warmth and competence have an impact on consumers' feelings toward brands, purchase intentions, and brand loyalty (Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012; Ivens et al. 2015; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2022).

Research has also shown that consumers perceive certain types of organizations, for example nonprofit organizations as being warmer but less competent than those that are for-profit (Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010) and that luxury brands are stereotypically associated with competence (Hu and Rucker 2013; Lee and Bolton 2020; Septianto, Seo, and Zhao 2022).

Research in the advertising field has shown that the visual and linguistic content of advertising messages has an influence on attributions of warmth and competence, which are important determinants for ad effectiveness. For example, warmth appeals have been found to be effective to advertise product categories related to warmth, care, sustainability, and security (Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012; Chang et al. 2019; Geuens, De Pelsmacker, and Faseur 2011). Research in relation to endorsers (Infanger and Sczesny 2015) showed that ads featuring communal (warm) instead of agentic (competent) endorsers, male and female, generate more positive attitudes toward the ad and the brand, whereas in other research (Zawisza and Pittard 2015) the perceived competence of characters in ads results in higher purchase intent for high-involvement products and the perceived warmth of characters is slightly more effective than competence for low-involvement products. Results of several studies (Hoang, Knoferle, and Warlop 2020; Hoang, Warlop, and Knoferle 2017) show that different types of humor in advertising influence consumers' impressions of firms' competence and warmth, with incongruity-resolution humor enhancing perception of firm competence, whereas tension-relief humor enhanced impressions of firms' warmth. Yet other research has showed that certain brand personality dimensions such as competence, excitement, and sophistication are consistent across several countries (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, and Garolera 2001).

Ultimately, research shows that it is important for brands to cultivate a combination of warmth and competence because this approach results in positive emotional consequences, including feelings of admiration for a brand as well as higher purchase intention (Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012; Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010). In the end, "being high in both dimensions provides firms with an extra benefit that surpasses the individual contributions of each" (Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012, 193) because if a brand is described only on one of the two basic dimensions, warmth or competence, then customers (especially those highly involved) make negative assumptions about the omitted dimension (Peter and Ponzi 2018).

Surprisingly, despite the wide range of marketing studies using SCM dimensions (See Halkias and Diamantopoulos 2020), research to date has primarily focused on how visual representation of advertising characters, verbal messaging, or consumers' overall image of brands conveys warmth and competence. In addition, in the realm of advertising in particular, research on how voices convey warmth and competence is extremely limited. One notable exception is the study by Wiener, Chartrand, and Tanya (2014) conducted in the United States. Their research is among the few studies that delve into how consumers make positive or negative inferences about a speaker along both dimensions of warmth and competence and how these impressions influence purchase intentions. They found that female speakers were perceived as more competent and warmer than male speakers. Additionally, they found that a creaky voice was perceived as less warm and less competent compared with a tense, whispery, or a breathy voice. The whispery voice was rated as moderate in both warmth and competence, whereas the tense voice was perceived as more competent than any other voice type and generated the highest interest in the advertised product. Research conducted in France using a similar framework has shown that low-pitch voices lead to more positive attitude and associations (such as being perceived as strong, mature, wise, and warm) toward a brand, as well as greater brand recall (Zoghaib 2017). Additionally, low-pitch, dull, and smooth voices are perceived as conveying warmth, whereas high-pitch and smooth voices are perceived as conveying competence (Zoghaib 2019).

Interestingly, research has not yet considered the extent to which hard sell and soft sell vocal styles convey warmth and competence and how they could contribute to building or undermining brand personality. Our research provides a first step in this direction by assessing consumers' judgements of warmth and competence in soft sell and hard sell advertising voices across two national environments.

Voice properties likely to influence perceptions of hard sell and soft sell vocal styles

As previously mentioned, voice professionals identify the distinction between hard sell and soft sell vocal styles as revolving around three interacting elements: *speed*, *loudness*, and *pitch*. Overall, research has shown that listeners use these three key elements of voice to evaluate speakers, decode emotions, and infer personality characteristics. Advertising messages, whether hard or soft sell, constantly exploit these key characteristics of the voice, often exaggerating them in order to make advertising messages salient and identifiable as such (Medrado, Ferreira, and Behlau 2005). This emphatic function of advertising voices is also designed to add meaning to the act of commercial communication by working as a signifier of personality characteristics (Desmarais 2000; Rodero and Potter 2021).

Speech rate

As previously discussed, research on speech rate shows that faster speakers, regardless of gender, are generally evaluated more positively than slower speakers because fast speech is perceived as a sign of greater competence (Brown 1980; Brown, Strong, and Rencher 1975; Smith et al. 1975; Zuckerman and Miyake 1993). However, it must be noted that, while speakers using a very fast rate are seen as competent, they are also viewed as less socially attractive compared with those who speak at moderate to moderately fast rates (Street, Brady, and Putman 1983), and that the faster the speaking rate, the less benevolent (warm) a voice is perceived (Smith et al. 1975). In contrast, research has found that speakers who use a normal or slower rate tend to be evaluated higher in benevolence (as more polite, likeable, kind, sincere, dependable, sociable) than fast speakers (Brown, Giles, and Thakerar 1985; Smith et al. 1975). For females in particular, analysis of a set of speech features has shown that fast female voices are judged as conveying likeability when associated with high pitch and as conveying intelligence when associated with low pitch (Parker and Borrie 2018).

On the whole research has shown that, compared with slow speakers, fast speakers are perceived as more fluent, truthful, emphatic, active, serious, and persuasive (Apple, Streeter, and Kraus 1979); charismatic (Novák-Tót, Niebuhr, and Chen 2017); confident, intelligent, ambitious, and active (Brown, Giles, and Thakerar 1985; Jiang and Pell 2017; Smith et al. 1975; Thakerar and Giles 1981); credible and persuasive (Miller et al. 1976); and more influential, expert, and having high status (Brooke and Ng 1986; Street, Brady, and Putman 1983; Thakerar and Giles 1981).

In the field of advertising specifically, research on speech rate has mostly focused on speech compression, a technique used in advertising to reduce costs. Early research by MacLachlan and LaBarbera (1978) found that consumers prefer, and better recall, time-compressed commercials that are approximately one-third faster than the usual rate of speech. More recently Chattopadhyay et al. (2003) found that a voice with faster-than-normal syllable speed and low pitch produces more favorable ad attitudes, and more favorable brand attitudes. Research has also found that a moderate rate of 180 words per minute achieves best results and that speech rates that are too fast can disrupt rather than enhance listeners' processing of an advertising message (Rodero 2020). Fast speech can also make listeners more likely to judge the speaker as condescending and as being low in benevolence; it can undermine attention, interest, and cognitive processing in an advertising message and may lessen emotional involvement and undermine recall (Chattopadhyay et al. 2003; Megehee, Dobie, and Grant 2003; Moore, Hausknecht, and Thamodaran 1986; Rodero 2020; Rodero, Larrea, and Vázquez 2013; Schlinger et al. 1983; Smith et al. 1975; Smith and Shaffer 1995; Woodall and Burgoon 1984).

Pitch

Research on voice pitch shows that both men and women find males with low-pitched voices to be attractive (Feinberg et al. 2005b; 2008; Jones et al. 2010). Studies have also showed that

male and female low-pitch voices are usually perceived as more confident and persuasive (Dubey, Farrell, and Ang 2018; Guyer, Fabrigar, and Vaughan-Johnston 2019; Jiang and Pell 2017; Tigue et al. 2012), and as conveying strength or dominance (Apple, Streeter, and Kraus 1979; Borkowska and Pawlowski 2011; Jones et al. 2010; McAleer, Todorov, and Belin 2014; Tsantani et al. 2016), as well as competence, credibility, status, power, trust, truthfulness, expertise, and authority—all attributes that correlate to leadership capacity (Anderson and Klofstad 2012; Apple, Streeter, and Kraus 1979; Klofstad, Anderson, and Peters 2012; Ko, Sadler, and Galinsky 2015; Sorokowski et al. 2019; Tigue et al. 2012; Tsantani et al. 2016). In contrast, high-pitch voices tend to be associated with opposite traits. However, some studies go against these findings. For example, O'Connor and Barclay (2017) found that higher-pitch male and female voices are more likely to be trusted in economic contexts involving financial exchanges.

Other research provides results that differ depending on speaker gender. For instance, some studies show that male low-pitch voices are more strongly associated with dominance than female low-pitch voices (McAleer, Todorov, and Belin 2014; Tsantani et al. 2016), that higher-than-average pitch is associated with increased dominance in female voices (McAleer, Todorov, and Belin 2014) and that male voices are judged as more confident than female voices (Jiang and Pell 2017). Other studies (Borkowska and Pawlowski 2011; Hodges-Simeon, Gaulin, and Puts 2010; Re et al. 2012) found that higher-pitch female voices were perceived as more attractive than lower-pitch female voices but that lower-pitch male voices were perceived as more attractive than higher-pitch male voices. Borkowska and Pawlowski (2011), however, showed that female voices with a pitch too high sound irritating, and immature. Studies have also shown that judgements of agreeableness differ depending on speaker gender, with lower-pitch female voices judged as more agreeable than higher-pitch female voices and higher-pitch male voices judged as more agreeable than their lower-pitch counterparts (Imhof 2010). Overall, low-pitch voices are considered attractive and masculine in men, and high-pitch voices are considered attractive, and signal femininity and youth in women (Feinberg 2008; Feinberg et al. 2005a; Ko, Judd, and Blair 2006; Krumpholz et al. 2022; Pisanski and Rendall 2011). Interestingly, research also suggests that voices with average pitch are the most attractive. Daniel and McCabe (1992) found that mid-pitch voices for both genders sounded the sexiest, and Bruckert et al. (2010) showed that voices that are average in pitch and timbre with regular smoother voice textures were perceived as more attractive irrespective of the speaker's or listener's gender.

Research in the advertising field specifically tends to confirm the importance of low vocal pitch. Studies have shown that low-pitch voices are perceived as more attractive and credible and generate more favorable brand attitudes and cognitive responses toward an ad (Chattopadhyay et al. 2003). Research has also found that the gender of a low-pitch voice matters. For instance, Knapp (1980) argued that a low-pitch male voice gives a radio message more authority because it is more persuasive and convincing. However, interestingly, research across countries produces inconsistent results. For example, in the United States female listeners' purchase intention is increased by a low-pitch male voice but decreased by a low-pitch female voice (Wiener, Chartrand, and Tanya 2014) whereas in Spain, low-pitch female voices are considered as sounding professional, trustworthy and reliable and generate more favorable attitudes toward the ad and the brand (Martin-Santana et al. 2015; Martín-Santana, Reinares-Lara, and Reinares-Lara 2017; Rodero, Larrea, and Vázquez 2010). Therefore, it appears that the cultural context in which advertising voices are used influences consumers' attitudes toward them, ultimately impacting consumer behavior.

Loudness

Another voice quality element that contributes to voice attractiveness is loudness. Research has showed that individuals who speak loudly are perceived as powerful speakers and as such are perceived as more confident and persuasive (Jiang and Pell 2017; Van Zant and Berger 2020) more attractive (Zuckerman and Miyake 1993) credible, trustworthy, competent, and assertive.

However, loud speakers can also be perceived as dominant, aggressive, less sincere, less polite, and less desirable as a work partner (Bradac, Mulac, and House 1988; Brooke and Ng 1986; Idemaru et al. 2020; Miller et al. 1976; Page and Balloun 1978). In contrast, low voice volume (soft voices) suggests introversion, deference, submission, politeness, and uncertainty (Brown and Bradshaw 1985; Idemaru et al. 2020; Mallory and Miller 1958; Page and Balloun 1978) but has also been found to convey positive attributes such as maturity and sincerity (Page and Balloun 1978).

Advertising research on voice intensity is scarce. Whereas loudness of an advertising voice positively affects credibility under consumers' low-involvement conditions (Chebat et al. 2007; Gélinas-Chebat, Chebat, and Vaninsky 1996) and that high intensity, high intonation voices could also trigger the listeners' defensive reaction. A low-intensity, low-intonation voice may also bypass this defence mechanism (Gelinas-Chebat and Chebat 1992).

Cross-cultural research of hard sell and soft sell appeals

Our focus on assessing consumers' perceptions of the warmth and competence of hard sell and soft sell voices across different countries necessitates a review of prior cross-cultural research in this area. Although research on consumers' perception of hard sell and soft sell appeals exists, it is extremely limited and has not considered the contribution of voice to these appeals. This limited body of research nevertheless indicates that hard sell and soft sell appeals can be used varyingly across cultures, and with different levels of effectiveness (Albers-Miller and Royne Stafford 1999; Dianoux, Linhart, and Vnouckova 2014; Lin 2001; Mueller 1987, 1992). For instance, research on print advertisements suggests a relatively consistent acceptance of hard sell appeals across specific markets such as the United States and Japan (Okazaki, Mueller, and Taylor 2010a), whereas other studies show that soft sell may be more effective than hard sell as part of global consumer culture positioning strategies because it generates more favorable impressions and less irritation (Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra 1999; Amine, Chao, and Arnold 2005; Okazaki, Mueller, and Diehl 2013). Other research (Butt, Mukerji, and Shareef 2017) provides contrasting results, revealing that, in developing markets such as Pakistan, hard sell ads can be perceived as more believable. The important point to note here is that none of these studies address the contribution of voice to hard sell and soft sell appeals.

Cross-cultural research of advertising voices

Cross-cultural research on advertising voices has been predominantly limited to quantifying male and female voiceovers in television commercials as part of broader quantitative content analyses across different countries (Furnham and Farragher 2000; Furnham and Paltzer 2010; Matthes, Prieler, and Adam 2016). In contrast, qualitative studies on advertising voices, especially cross-cultural studies of advertising vocal styles, are extremely scarce. Despite early recognition of voice's social significance (Sapir 1927) and psychological studies indicating that listeners' cultural background influences their assessment of voice quality and may affect the interpretation of emotions or personality traits conveyed by the voice (Scherer 1972; Scherer, Banse, and Wallbott 2001; Waarama 2015; Waaramaa et al. 2021), cross-cultural advertising research has neglected to explore the social and cultural formatting of advertising voices in different country environments and to qualitatively explore consumers' attitude toward these voices, apart from a handful of studies (Desmarais 2000; Desmarais and Vignolles 2019; Desmarais, Vignolles, and Mukherjee 2024). Desmarais (2000) investigated the culturally formatted characteristics of advertising voices and argued that they represent sociocultural constructs transmitted through advertising, shaped by industry practices and institutionalized by mass media. The study shed light on how advertising professionals from different countries shape and select voices to convey specific social and psychological attributes deemed competent

and authoritative to their consumers. Accordingly, at the country level, "*vocal formations*"—defined as specific vocal styles or symbolic vocal constructions within the advertising discourse—(Desmarais 2000, 137) are cultivated over time and reinforced by industry and media practices. Through repeated exposure, these vocal patterns encode cultural distinctions and seamlessly integrate into the national cultural landscape, becoming familiar and ingrained in consumers' everyday life.

The other rare qualitative cross-cultural studies of advertising voices suggest universal similarities but also cultural differences in consumers' preference for hard sell and soft sell vocal styles. Consumers in certain countries prefer the soft sell vocal style over the hard sell vocal style (Desmarais and Vignolles 2019). Overall, the soft sell approach may be the most appropriate vocal style to use as part of a global consumer culture positioning strategy (Desmarais, Vignolles, and Mukherjee 2024).

Cultural context

For this study, we wanted to test whether consumers who are immersed in a hard sell environment (in a country) assess voices differently than those in a soft sell environment. Following other studies (Hekkert, Thurgood, and Whitfield 2013; Yoo 2008) we suggest the established advertising environment within which consumers "exist" works as a *priming environment*, influencing their familiarity for, and thus possibly their character assessment of, specific types of voices.

France and New Zealand were chosen as research settings due to their contrasting advertising styles, France being significantly more soft sell oriented than New Zealand. Indeed, research has shown how "soft sell outsells hard sell in France" (Taylor, Hoy, and Haley 1996, 11), with advertising characterized by emotional messages using love, sex appeal, or humor appeals, (Appelbaum and Halliburton 1993; Biswas, Olsen, and Carlet 1992), and with advertising professionals often relying on soft sell voices that they believe convey politeness and respect (Desmarais 2000, 2003). France is also considered a high- or high- to medium-context culture (Biswas, Olsen, and Carlet 1992; Hall and Hall 1990; Kittler, Rygl, and Mackinnon 2011; Laroche, Vinhal Nepomuceno, and Richard 2014) relying on indirect, implicit communication and on developing complex fields of connotations. French consumers are therefore by and large exposed to and thus familiar with a high-context soft sell environment.

In contrast, New Zealand is characterized as a low-context culture that values more direct and explicit communication. Research on New Zealand advertising (Andrews, Lysonski, and Durvasula 1991; Furnham and Farragher 2000; Lysonski and Pollay 1990; Michelle 2012) indicates a preference for immediate, direct, authoritative communication, evident in the abundance of explicit and unambiguous messages and the predominance of male characters and male voice-overs (Desmarais 2000, 2003, 2004). Consequently, New Zealand consumers are predominantly exposed to and familiar with a hard sell environment.

Furthermore, France and New Zealand diverge in terms of several cultural dimensions as outlined by Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov's (2010): power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and indulgence. One dimension that could play a role in consumers' assessment of our hard sell or soft sell voices is that of masculinity/femininity. The *masculinity/femininity* dimension examines the extent to which a culture values traditional view of masculine traits (e.g., assertiveness, competitiveness, admiration of the strong) versus feminine traits (e.g., nurture, friendliness, and being in touch with one's own feelings) (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). With a masculine index score of 43, France is relatively feminine compared with New Zealand, which scores 58 and qualifies as a masculine country (Hofstede Insights 2023; see also Phillips 1996). Therefore, consistent with Hofstede's cultural descriptions, individuals from a somewhat feminine country such as France may rate slow, warm, soft voices more favorably than hard sell voices. In contrast New Zealanders, who are immersed in a masculine culture, may prefer loud, fast, upbeat, commanding hard sell voices (in particular, male voices) associated with power, competitiveness, and assertiveness.

Research questions

The following research questions were posed in this study:

- Which warmth and competence personality traits tend to be associated with hard sell and soft sell voices?
- Are perceptions of warmth and competence personality traits of hard sell and soft sell voices different or similar across countries?
- Do respondents perceive male and female voices differently in terms of warmth and competence?

Method

Stimuli

We recorded four distinct voices: male hard sell (MHS), female hard sell (FHS), male soft sell (MSS), and female soft sell (FSS). All recordings were performed by professional voice artists with extensive experience in delivering advertising messages for prominent radio and television channels. Given the lack of academic definitions of *hard sell vocal* and *soft sell vocal* styles, we relied on the definitions provided by industry professionals reviewed earlier and sought guidance from our voice artists to create the recordings. For the hard sell voices, in line with professionals' definitions, our voice artists delivered high to mid pitch, fast-paced, loud, excited, energetic, insistent, shouty voices designed to convey energy, urgency, assertiveness, and enthusiasm. The resulting hard sell voices were similar to the loud and rapid hard sell approach commonly observed in New Zealand and described in previous research (Desmarais 2000). The female hard sell message was 15 seconds (224 words per minute) with an average pitch of 394 Hz and an average volume of 85 dB, and the male hard sell message lasted 16 seconds (210 words per minute) with an average pitch of 268 Hz and an average volume of 84 dB.

To create the soft sell recordings, we also relied on the definitions provided by industry professionals reviewed earlier and sought guidance from our voice artists. Our voice artists delivered low to mid pitch, slow-paced, soft, calm, suggestive, gentle, whispering voices to create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere and a sense of intimacy with the audience. The resulting soft sell voices closely resembled the softer and slower approach commonly associated with soft sell advertising in France, as described in previous research (Desmarais 2000). These voices were approximately twice as slow as the hard sell messages. The female soft sell message was 30 seconds long (112 wpm) with an average pitch of 181 Hz and an average volume of 76 dB, and the male soft sell message lasted 27 seconds long (124 wpm) with an average pitch of 150 Hz and an average volume of 76 dB.

Manipulation check: Validation of voice characteristics

To confirm that respondents could identify each voice as what they were intended to represent—hard sell or soft sell—, we asked all respondents to rate each voice's characteristics using three items on a semantic differential 7-point scale: *fast–slow*, *shouting–whispering*, and *excited–calm*. We selected these three items because they capture the three main characteristics of hard sell and soft sell approaches consistently identified by voice professionals. Table 1 shows that New Zealand and French respondents described our hard sell voices as fast, shouting, and excited, and our soft sell voices as slow, whispering, and calm. This correct decoding of each voice by respondents validated our production of these voice recordings as being representative of the hard sell and soft sell styles, and as being consistent with voice professionals' descriptions of these styles (Alburger 1999; Baker 2014; Expertvillage 2008a, 2008b; Parachuk 2018; Shih 2020; Shires 2023; 2018b; Voiceovers.com 2024; Voices 2024).

Table 1. Respondents' description of each voice's characteristics.

Characteristic	Statistic	Fast vs. Slow	Shouting vs. Whispering	Excited vs. Calm
Male hard sell	Mean	1.97	2.23	1.98
	SD	0.94	1.04	1.09
	t-test	−38.213***	−30.14***	−32.84***
Female hard sell	Mean	1.43	1.96	1.43
	SD	0.61	0.89	0.64
	t-test	−74.23***	−40.72***	−71.04***
Male soft sell	Mean	5.77	5.39	5.98
	SD	1.16	1.08	1.12
	t-test	27.1***	22.83***	31.49***
Female soft sell	Mean	6.28	6.27	6.42
	SD	0.78	0.83	1.01
	t-test	51.83***	48.85***	42.75***

Note. $N = 319$. $p < 0.1$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{***}p < 0.01$.
The *t*-tests determine whether the mean of each variable (i.e., fast vs. slow) is equal to 4, which is the midpoint of the 1–7 Likert scale.

The message

We tested "single-voice copy," as defined by Alburger (1999, 31) as a message "delivered in its entirety by a solo performer" (i.e., a message with no dialogue). With input from our voice professionals, we designed a message that could be adapted to both hard sell and soft sell vocal styles. Because listeners under low involvement better evaluate voice cues conditions (Gelinas-Chebat and Chebat 1992), the message was designed to be non-product-specific so respondents would focus primarily on the voice characteristics of the advertising message rather than focusing on elements that could affect processing of the message, such as product type, product involvement, and country of origin. This message design was crucial to maintain consistency in a cross-cultural study such as ours because specific types of voice might be associated with types of products in one culture but not in the other and could thereby influence respondents' assessments. Thus, the message we submitted to respondents was the equivalent of an all-purpose, descriptive, low-involvement message designed so they would concentrate their attention on the vocal style. Participants were specifically asked to focus on *how* the message (see below) was delivered, not on what was being said.

> For one week only we are offering a different range of products, which can be used for any purpose, whether indoors or outdoors, come rain or shine. Simply choose from beige, black, gray, yellow, green or white. You can reach us by phone, fax, or visit our website. Call us now for an obligation-free quote.

Participants

Data collection was conducted in two business schools from France and New Zealand. After ethics approval was granted by these institutions, a total of 312 undergraduate students from participated in the study: 188 from New Zealand and 124 from France. The average age of respondents for both countries was 22.79 years. Gender distribution among respondents was equal for both countries, with 51% female and 49% male participants.

Respondents belonged to *Generation Z*, defined as the first "digital native" generation, known for their quick engagement with bite-sized online content and their comfort, sometimes bordering on obsession, with mobile devices and digital communication such as social media (Anderson and Jiang 2018; Childers and Boatwright 2021; Dimock 2019; Munsch 2021; Quesada, Ugarte, and Cortina 2023; Seemiller and Grace 2019; Trevino BeñAvides et al. 2023). Social media significantly influences their attitudes toward brands and their purchasing decisions, which are often guided by influencers and peers (Childers and Boatwright 2021; Duffett 2020; Fan et al. 2023; Martínez-López et al. 2020; Munsch 2021; Sujanska and Nadanyiova 2022). They typically enjoy interactive engagement, personalized experiences, and authentic communication from brands (Canavan 2020; Dwidienawati et al. 2019; Munsch 2021).

However, Gen Z is not solely engaged with digital devices and social media. There is evidence that these consumers multitask with media (Nielsen 2018) and that traditional channels such as

radio or television are effective in reaching them (Aspire by Marketron 2023, 2024; Audacy 2021; Huang 2022; The Drum 2023). In New Zealand and France specifically, statistics show that young people do also listen to radio. In New Zealand, for instance, 75% of people age 18 to 39 years listen to commercial radio weekly which is 1.18 million people, nearly one-quarter of the total population; among adolescents, 64% of those age 13 to 18 years tune in weekly (Trb 2020). In France, French adults and adolescents listen to radio for an average of 2 hours and 52 minutes per weekday (Medialandscapes 2024) indicating that Gen Z is sensitive to media based on audio stimuli.

To date, academic advertising research has primarily focused on Gen Z's attitudes toward visual marketing content rather than aural stimuli. Studies have examined Gen Z's perception of artificial intelligence-generated advertising imagery (Mamedov and Solunina 2024), their preferred web advertising visual designs (Martinez, Neves, and Martinez 2020), and the impact of visual merchandizing elements on their impulse buying tendencies (Aires, Dias, and Pereira 2024). Research has also highlighted the effectiveness of emojis in marketing communications to enhance a brand's emotional expression and trust to Gen Z consumers (Duffett and Maraule 2024). However, there is a notable lack of research on Gen Z's response to advertising vocal stimuli. The only research studying the impact of voice on Gen Z has been on social media influencers and suggests the importance of voice in capturing and influencing Gen Z consumers' attention. For example, Lin et al. (2024) found that enhancing virtual influencers' voice capabilities can increase users' interaction pleasure, whereas Li et al. (2023) showed that virtual streamers who raised their voice and changed their tone could better capture Gen Z consumers' attention, conveying naturalness and authenticity and increasing credibility.

Advertising research on Gen Z using the SCM dimensions of warmth and competence is also extremely limited. The only recent study by Liu et al. (2024) explored how competent versus warm spokespersons influence Gen Z consumers. They found that competent virtual spokespersons enhance Gen Z consumers' preference for radically new products, whereas warm virtual spokespersons improve perceptions of social connection and willingness to buy. To date, no research has explored how Gen Z perceives advertising voices, particularly hard sell and soft sell, in terms of warmth and competence traits.

Survey instrument and items

We conducted the research via an online questionnaire designed on Qualtrics and administered in university computer laboratories. Participants were instructed to listen to each voice and to evaluate its personality based on various semantic opposite items/personality traits, using a 7-point scale. The items were selected based on warmth and competence categories outlined in social psychology's SCM (Fiske et al. 2002). Because this study straddles advertising and voice research, we selected SCM items that are relevant to conceptualize and assess both voice and brand character and that have been used in previous marketing and voice studies (Addington 1968; Ball et al. 1982; Imhof 2010; Megehee, Dobie, and Grant 2003; Page and Balloun 1978; Thakerar and Giles 1981; Waaramaa et al. 2021; Wiener, Chartrand, and Tanya 2014). Ultimately, we selected seven warmth and seven competence items based on this literature. Each of the items consisted of two opposite personality traits placed on opposite ends of a 1–7 scale in relation to warmth (unpleasant–pleasant, impolite–polite, insincere–sincere, arrogant–humble, untrustworthy–trustworthy, unattractive–attractive, not seductive–seductive) and competence (incompetent–competent, not expert–expert, not confident–confident, not credible–credible, not persuasive–persuasive, weak–powerful, low status–high status).

Analysis

Given our theoretical foundation from previous literature on personality trait items and the SCM, we used confirmatory factor analysis to test the validity of our warmth and competence

model across each of the four voices. From the items which were measured in our questionnaire, composite variables were created for each of the male and female voices: male hard sell warmth (MHSW); male hard sell competence (MHSC); male soft sell warmth (MSSW); male soft sell competence (MSSC); female hard sell warmth (FHSW); female hard sell competence (FHSC); female soft sell warmth (FSSW); and female soft sell competence (FSSC).

Figures 1 and 2 display all factor loadings. To check that the warmth and competence constructs were valid across countries, we conducted a factor analysis by combining responses from New Zealand and France for each voice (MHS, FHS, MSS, FSS) and each item (e.g., polite,

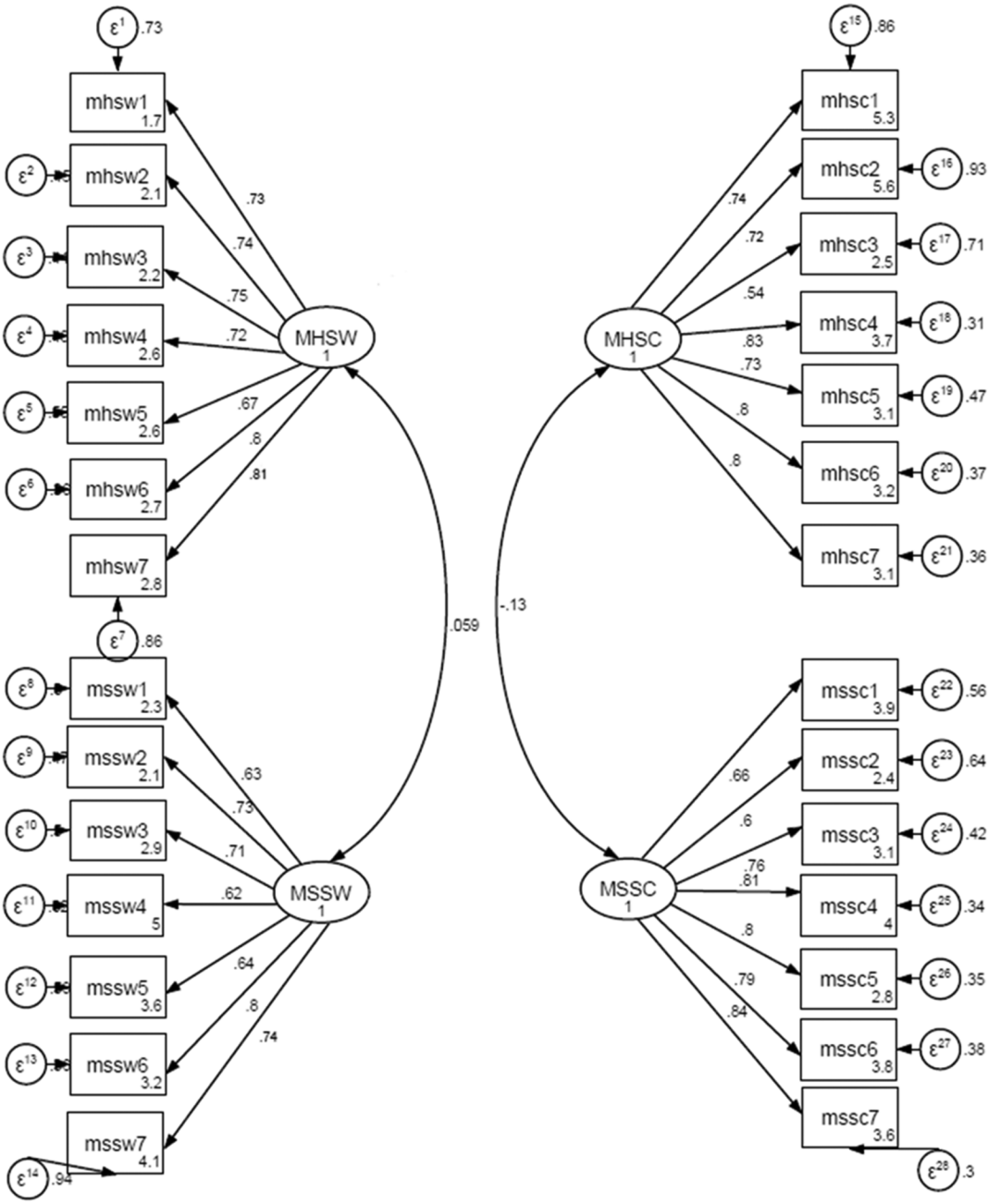

Figure 1. Confirmatory factor analysis of male voices.

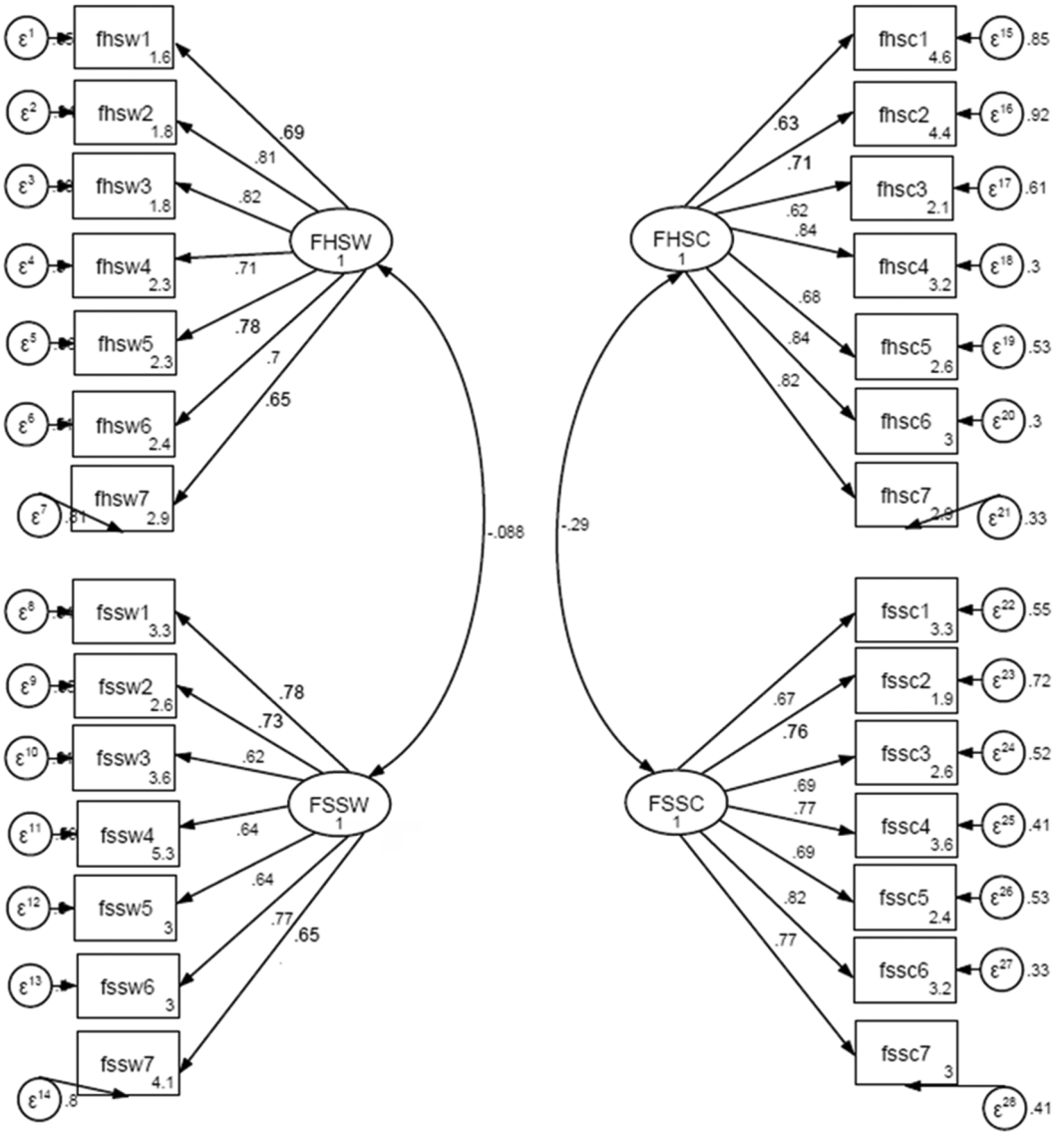

Figure 2. Confirmatory factor analysis of female voices.

competent). Given the cultural differences between New Zealand and France, particularly in attitudes toward communication and voices (as previously noted earlier, with research indicating a French preference for soft sell and female voices) we expected variations in factor loadings across voices. For instance, the competence item 2 "powerful< >weak" for the male soft sell voice has a relatively low factor loading at 0.6. For the other three voices, however, the factor loadings for item 2 "powerful< >weak" are acceptable at 0.72, 0.71 and 0.76; therefore, we retained the item "powerful< >weak" as part of the composite variable "competence."

We tested the goodness of fit of our model. We have reported comparative fit index, root mean square error of approximation, Tucker Lewis Index, and standardized root mean square residual in Tables 2 and 3. All the results are within the acceptable range which confirms warmth and competence are distinct constructs. Next, we calculated the Cronbach's alpha value to measure the reliability of these composite variables. The alpha values provided an adequate reliability level (see Table 4).

Table 2. Goodness of fit for male voices.

Statistic	Warmth	Competence
Root mean square error of approximation	0.072	0.083
Comparative fit index	0.975	0.913
Tucker Lewis index	0.953	0.902
Standardized root mean square residual	0.035	0.047

Table 3. Goodness of fit for female voices.

Statistic	Warmth	Competence
Root mean square error of approximation	0.085	0.069
Comparative fit index	0.961	0.916
Tucker Lewis index	0.941	0.901
Standardized root mean square residual	0.039	0.042

Table 4. Cronbach's alpha test.

	Warmth		Competence	
Voice type	New Zealand	France	New Zealand	France
Male hard sell	0.8459	0.8509	0.8567	0.8174
Female hard sell	0.8616	0.8226	0.8529	0.7313
Male soft sell	0.7718	0.8702	0.8816	0.9021
Female soft sell	0.7622	0.8079	0.8651	0.8297

We also wanted to obtain a more precise analysis, item by item, for each country and voice (MHS, FHS, MSS, FSS); therefore, the mean and standard deviation for each of the seven warmth and competence items were calculated. A series of *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether the mean of each item (e.g., unpleasant vs. pleasant) for each country is equal to 4, which represents the midpoint of the 1–7 Likert scale. This approach allowed us to determine whether a voice, within each country, was significantly associated with a character trait or not (e.g., assessed as clearly unpleasant, high status, or polite). These results are reported in Tables 5–8.

Next, we assessed the difference in voice perceptions between France and New Zealand. We conducted a series of *t*-tests to compare the means of the warmth and competence items between both countries and to determine whether there were significant differences in these assessments. These results are reported in Tables 5–8.

To determine whether there were significant assessment differences between New Zealand and France for these overall warmth and competence composite variables, we conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) (Table 9). For a better visualization of the results, we plotted the aggregated warmth composite variable (X axis) and competence composite variable (Y axis) for all four voices and for each country in Figure 3.

Lastly, we conducted paired *t*-tests in order to understand whether there was, within each country, a significant difference in respondents' perceptions of male and female voices in terms of warmth and competence (Tables 10 and 11).

Results

Male hard sell vocal identity markers

Warmth

The ANOVA test for the warmth composite variable of the MHSW revealed no significant difference in the warmth assessment of that voice between New Zealand and France ($F(6) = 1.88$, $p < 0.1$); in other words, MHSW was rated very low in both countries in terms of warmth (see Table 9 and Figure 3).

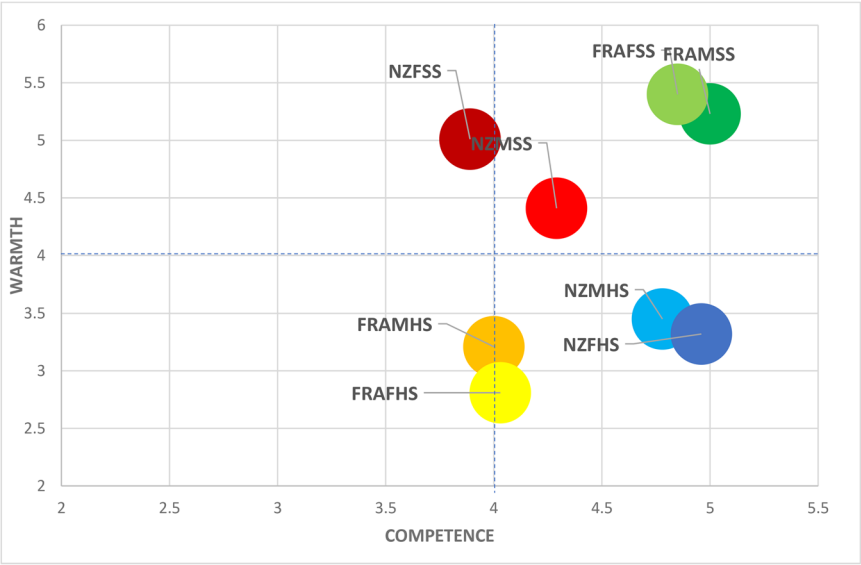

Figure 3. Overview of respondents' assessment of each voice's warmth and competence factors.
Note. On the scale, the lowest value represents low in warmth and competence, and the highest value represents high in warmth and competence.

Analysis of the seven warmth items (Table 5) gives a more precise indication of respondents' perceptions of the MHSW voice. Both New Zealand and French respondents associated MHSW with the same four negative warmth traits, finding the voice unattractive, not seductive, unpleasant, and impolite (see Table 5). In terms of the difference between countries, French respondents found MHSW significantly more unpleasant mean difference 0.680 (t (310) = 3.998, $p < 0.0001$), less trustworthy mean difference 0.660, t(310) = 4.040, $p < 0.0001$, and less attractive mean difference 0.420, t(310) = 2.391, $p < 0.0174$) than New Zealanders did (see Table 5). In addition, while New Zealand respondents assessed MHSW as humble and moderately trustworthy, the French rated it as arrogant and untrustworthy.

Competence

The ANOVA test for competence for MHSC shows New Zealanders rated this voice significantly higher in competence than the French did (F(6) = 6.77, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 9 and Figure 3). Analysis of the 7 competence items (Table 5) reveals that both New Zealand and French respondents associated MHSC with the same four positive competence traits, finding the voice very confident, powerful, competent, persuasive (See Table 5). Nevertheless, there was a significant difference between French and New Zealand respondents' assessment of all competence items except "powerful," indicating that New Zealanders considered MHSC as being significantly more expert (mean difference 0.680; t(310) = 4.152, $p < 0.0001$), competent (mean difference 0.600; t(310) = 3.99, $p < 0.0001$), persuasive (mean difference 0.540; t(310) = 3.11, $p < 0.0020$), and credible (mean difference 0.530; t(310) = 3.336, $p < 0.0010$) than French respondents did (see Table 5). The major difference in competence items across countries was in relation to status, with New Zealanders rating the voice as conveying high status ($M_{New\ Zealand\ MHS}$ = 4.44, SD = 1.14) and to the French conveying low status ($M_{France\ MHS}$ = 2.85, SD = 1.61); t(310)=10.21, $p < 0.0001$).

Table 5. Assessment of the male hard sell voice (MHS) in New Zealand and France, and New Zealand vs. France.

	New Zealand					France					Difference Between Countries		
Factor	M	SD	*t*-test	*p* Value	Voice characterization	M	SD	*t*-test	*p* Value	Voice characterization	Diff	*t*-test	*p* Value
Warmth	2.14	1.31	−19.50***	0.000	Not seductive	2.30	1.34	−14.10***	0.000	Not seductive	−0.160	−1.046	0.2963
	3.34	1.53	−5.894***	0.000	Unattractive	2.92	1.50	−7.987***	0.000	Unattractive	0.420	2.391**	0.0174
	3.55	1.45	−4.218***	0.000	Unpleasant	2.87	1.50	−8.334***	0.000	Unpleasant	0.680	3.998***	0.0001
	3.76	1.39	−2.409**	0.017	Impolite	3.51	1.43	−3.805***	0.000	Impolite	0.250	1.537	0.1253
	3.68	1.39	−3.141***	0.002	Insincere	3.92	1.53	−0.586	0.559	Neither (2)	−0.240	−1.434	0.1527
	4.14	1.38	1.366	0.174	Neither (1)	3.48	1.46	−3.916***	0.000	Untrustworthy	0.660	4.040***	0.0001
	4.60	1.17	−7.029***	0.000	Humble	3.15	1.22	−7.796***	0.000	Arrogant	1.450	1.816**	0.0704
Competence	6.05	0.89	31.70***	0.000	Confident	5.72	1.39	13.71***	0.000	Confident	0.330	2.557**	0.0110
	5.79	1.06	23.14***	0.000	Powerful	5.96	1.03	21.16***	0.000	Powerful	−0.170	−1.402	0.1619
	4.44	1.14	5.296***	0.000	High status	2.85	1.61	−7.889***	0.000	Low status	1.590	10.21***	0.0001
	5.13	1.23	12.57***	0.000	Competent	4.53	1.40	4.218***	0.000	Competent	0.600	3.99***	0.0001
	4.87	1.41	8.470***	0.000	Persuasive	4.33	1.63	2.250**	0.026	Persuasive	0.540	3.11***	0.0020
	4.91	1.32	9.463***	0.000	Expert	4.23	1.55	1.611	0.110	Neither (3)	0.680	4.152***	0.0001
	4.59	1.26	6.419***	0.000	Credible	4.06	1.53	0.467	0.642	Neither (4)	0.530	3.336***	0.0010

Note. *$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

The within-country *t*-tests (columns 4 and 9) examine whether the mean of each item (e.g., unpleasant vs. pleasant) for each country is equal to 4, which represents the midpoint of the 1–7 Likert scale.

The *t*-tests in column 13 reports whether there is a significant difference in voice characterizations between the two countries.

Voices are characterized as: (1) neither "trustworthy" nor "untrustworthy"; (2) neither "sincere" nor "insincere"; (3) neither "expert" nor "not expert"; (4) neither "credible" nor "not credible."

Female hard sell vocal identity markers

Warmth

The ANOVA revealed a significant difference in the warmth assessment of FHSW between New Zealand and France with New Zealanders rating FHSW significantly higher in warmth than the French did ($F(6) = 3.43$, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 9 and Figure 3). Analysis of the 7 warmth items (see Table 6) reveals that FHSW was rated extremely low in both countries with New Zealand and French respondents associating FHSW with the same six negative warmth traits: not seductive, unattractive, unpleasant, impolite, insincere, and arrogant. In terms of differences, despite finding FHSW very unpleasant, unattractive, impolite, and averagely trustworthy, New Zealanders found it significantly more pleasant than the French did (mean difference 0.990; $t(310)=5.813$, $p < 0.0001$), more attractive (mean difference 0.940; $t(310)=5.180$, $p < 0.0001$), more trustworthy (mean difference 0.870; $t(310)=5.81$, $p < 0.0001$), and more polite (mean difference 0.530; $t(310)=3.099$, $p < 0.0001$).

Competence

The ANOVA revealed a significant difference in the competence assessment of FHSC between New Zealand and France, with New Zealanders rating FHSC significantly higher in competence than the French did ($F(6) = 14.96$, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 9 and Figure 3). Analysis of the 7 competence items (see Table 6) reveals that both New Zealand and French respondents found FHSC very confident and powerful. However, these were the only two positive competence traits common to both countries. New Zealanders rated FHSC significantly higher on all competence items than the French did, characterizing the voice as high status, competent, credible, expert, confident, powerful, and persuasive, whereas the French characterized it as low status (mean difference 1.720, $t(310) = 10.32$, $p < 0.0001$), low competence (mean difference 1.170, $t(310) = 7.653$, $p < 0.0001$), not credible (mean difference 0.930, $t(310) = 5.861$, $p < 0.0001$), averagely expert (mean difference 0.880, $t(310) = 5.467$, $p < 0.0001$), and averagely persuasive (mean difference 0.790, $t(310) = 4.314$, $p < 0.0001$).

Male soft sell vocal identity markers

Warmth

The ANOVA revealed a significant difference in the warmth assessment of MSSW between New Zealand and France. Both countries rated MSSW as high in warmth, but French respondents rated it significantly higher than New Zealanders did ($F(5) = 13.06$, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 9 and Figure 3). Analysis of the seven warmth items (see Table 7) shows similarities across countries. Both New Zealand and French respondents associated MSSW with the same five positive warmth traits: pleasant, polite, sincere, trustworthy, and humble with the top-ranking warmth traits for MSSW in both countries being polite, humble, and sincere. Analysis of the seven warmth items also shows significant differences between countries for all warmth items, with the New Zealanders assessing MSSW as significantly less attractive (mean difference −1.490, $t(310) = -8.052$, $p < 0.0001$), and less seductive (mean difference −1.060, $t(310) = -5.277$, $p < 0.0001$). In addition, despite finding MSSW pleasant, polite, sincere trustworthy, and humble, they found it less trustworthy than the French did (mean difference −0.830, $t(310) = -4.982$, $p < 0.0001$), less sincere (mean difference 0.650, $t(310) = -4.233$, $p < 0.0001$), less polite (mean difference mean difference −0.640, $t(310) = -5.032$, $p < 0.0001$), less pleasant (mean difference mean difference −0.540, $t(310) = -2.965$, $p < 0.0001$), and less humble (mean difference −0.400, $t(310) = -2.788$, $p < 0.0001$). The major difference in perception of warmth across countries was in relation to attractiveness and seduction, with the French characterizing the voice as seductive and attractive and New Zealanders finding it not seductive and unattractive.

Table 6. Assessment of the female hard sell voice (FHS) in New Zealand and France, and New Zealand vs. France.

	New Zealand					France					Difference Between Countries		
Factor	M	SD	*t*-test	*p* Value	Voice characterization	M	SD	*t*-test	*p* Value	Voice characterization	Diff	*t*-test	*p* Value
Warmth	2.13	1.35	−18.93***	0.000	Not seductive	2.06	1.22	−17.551***	0.000	Not seductive	0.070	0.465	0.6419
	3.39	1.67	−5.017***	0.000	Unattractive	2.45	1.40	−12.224***	0.000	Unattractive	0.940	5.180***	0.0001
	3.12	1.48	−8.125***	0.000	Unpleasant	2.13	1.46	−14.223***	0.000	Unpleasant	0.990	5.813***	0.0001
	3.63	1.49	−3.375***	0.001	Impolite	3.10	1.46	−6.854***	0.000	Impolite	0.530	3.099***	0.0021
	3.61	1.51	−3.525***	0.001	Insincere	3.46	1.55	−3.860***	0.000	Insincere	0.150	0.850	0.3962
	3.99	1.48	−0.049	0.961	Neither (1)	3.12	1.48	−6.568***	0.000	Untrustworthy	0.870	5.081***	0.0001
	3.42	1.15	−6.878***	0.000	Arrogant	3.33	1.23	−6.038***	0.000	Arrogant	0.090	0.658	0.5111
Competence	6.04	0.87	32.17***	0.000	Confident	5.27	1.54	9.167***	0.000	Confident	0.770	5.630***	0.0001
	5.45	1.20	16.49***	0.000	Powerful	5.44	1.26	12.647***	0.000	Powerful	0.010	0.071	0.9438
	4.20	1.40	1.980***	0.049	High status	2.48	1.50	−11.210***	0.000	Low status	1.720	10.32***	0.0001
	5.02	1.26	11.05***	0.000	Competent	3.85	1.41	−1.201	0.232	Neither (2)	1.170	7.653***	0.0001
	4.56	1.53	5.039***	0.000	Persuasive	3.77	1.66	−1.504	0.135	Neither (3)	0.790	4.314***	0.0001
	4.68	1.33	6.960***	0.000	Expert	3.80	1.48	−1.515	0.132	Neither (4)	0.880	5.467***	0.0001
	4.50	1.31	5.216***	0.000	Credible	3.57	1.46	−3.247***	0.002	Not credible	0.930	5.861***	0.0001

Note. $*p < 0.1$, $**p < 0.05$, $***p < 0.01$.

The within-country *t*-tests (columns 4 and 9) examine whether the mean of each item (e.g., unpleasant vs. pleasant) for each country is equal to 4, which represents the midpoint of the 1–7 Likert scale.

The *t*-tests in column 13 reports whether there is a significant difference in voice characterizations between the two countries.

Voices are characterized as (1) neither "trustworthy" nor "untrustworthy"; (2) neither "competent" nor "incompetent"; (3) neither "persuasive" nor "not persuasive"; (4) neither "expert" nor "not expert."

Table 7. Assessment of male soft sell voice (MSS) in New Zealand and France, and New Zealand vs. France.

	New Zealand					France					Difference Between Countries		
Factor	M	SD	*t*-test	*p* Value	Voice characterization	M	SD	*t*-test	*p* Value	Voice characterization	Diff	*t*-test	*p* Value
Warmth	3.69	1.76	−2.438**	0.016	Not seductive	4.75	1.70	4.887***	0.000	Seductive	−1.060	−5.277***	0.0001
	3.16	1.53	−7.502***	0.000	Unattractive	4.65	1.70	4.251***	0.000	Attractive	−1.490	−8.052***	0.0001
	4.48	1.59	4.156***	0.000	Pleasant	5.02	1.55	7.340***	0.000	Pleasant	−0.540	−2.965***	0.0033
	5.46	1.16	17.252***	0.000	Polite	6.10	1.00	23.176***	0.000	Polite	−0.640	−5.032***	0.0001
	4.65	1.37	6.496***	0.000	Sincere	5.30	1.26	11.397***	0.000	Sincere	−0.650	−4.233***	0.0001
	4.40	1.42	3.832***	0.000	Trustworthy	5.23	1.47	9.253***	0.000	Trustworthy	−0.830	−4.982***	0.0001
	5.04	1.24	11.525***	0.000	Humble	5.44	1.24	12.913***	0.000	Humble	−0.400	−2.788***	0.0056
Competence	4.84	1.30	8.848***	0.000	Confident	5.32	1.21	12.138***	0.000	Confident	−0.480	−3.280***	0.0012
	3.58	1.55	−3.761***	0.000	Weak	4.01	1.59	0.056	0.955	Neither (2)	−0.430	−2.429**	0.0157
	3.90	1.28	−1.081	0.281	Neither (1)	5.08	1.34	8.973***	0.000	High status	−1.180	−7.821***	0.0001
	4.75	1.18	8.598***	0.000	Competent	5.35	1.23	12.128***	0.000	Competent	−0.600	−4.394***	0.0001
	3.76	1.42	−2.357**	0.019	Not Persuasive	5.10	1.34	9.124***	0.000	Persuasive	−1.340	−8.340***	0.0001
	4.54	1.17	6.350***	0.000	Expert	5.18	1.29	10.129***	0.000	Expert	−0.640	−4.538***	0.0001
	4.56	1.26	6.122***	0.000	Credible	5.30	1.36	10.574***	0.000	Credible	−0.740	−4.918***	0.0001

Note. *$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

The within-country *t*-tests (columns 4 and 9) examine whether the mean of each item (e.g., unpleasant vs. pleasant) for each country is equal to 4, which represents the midpoint of the 1–7 Likert scale.

The *t*-tests in column 13 reports whether there is a significant difference in voice characterizations between the two countries.

Voices are characterized as: (1) neither "low status" nor "high status"; (2) neither "weak" nor "strong."

Competence

The ANOVA revealed a significant difference in the competence assessment of MSSC between New Zealand and France. Although MSSC was rated high in both countries in terms of competence, French respondents rated it significantly higher than New Zealanders did ($F(6) = 6.74$, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 9 and Figure 3). Analysis of the seven competence items (see Table 7) did show similarities across countries. Both New Zealand and French respondents associated MSSC with the same four positive competence traits: confident, competent, expert, and credible. The top-ranking competence traits for MSSC in both countries were confident, competent, and credible (see Table 7). Analysis of the seven competence items also shows significant differences between countries with New Zealand respondents assessing MSSC as significantly lower on all items, characterizing it as less persuasive (mean difference −1.340, $t(310) = -8.340$, $p < 0.0001$), having lower status (mean difference −1.180, $t(310) = -7.821$, $p < 0.0001$), being less credible (mean difference −0.740, $t(310) = -4.918$, $p < 0.0001$), less expert mean difference −0.640, $t(310) = -4.538$, $p < 0.0001$), less competent (mean difference −0.610, $t(310) = -4.394$, $p < 0.0001$), less confident (mean difference −0.480, $t(310) = -3.280$, $p < 0.0012$), and less powerful (mean difference −0.440, $t(310) = -2.429$, $p < 0.0157$) than the French did. The major differences in competence items across countries were in relation to persuasiveness and status, with the French rating the MSSC voice as being persuasive and conveying high status and New Zealanders rating the voice as being weak, not persuasive, and conveying low status.

Female soft sell vocal identity markers

Warmth

Both countries rated FSSW as very high in warmth. However, ANOVA revealed a slight difference in the warmth assessment of FSSW between New Zealand and France, with the French rating FSSW slightly higher than New Zealanders did ($F(5) = 3.23$, $p < 0.05$) (see Table 9 and Figure 3). Analysis of the seven warmth items (see Table 8) shows similarities across countries. Both New Zealand and French respondents associated FSSW with the same seven positive warmth traits: seductive, attractive, pleasant, polite, sincere, trustworthy, and humble (see Table 8). The top-ranking competence traits for FSSW in both countries were polite, pleasant, humble, and seductive. Despite these similarities across countries, there were also significant differences with New Zealand respondents characterizing FSSW as significantly less seductive (mean difference −0.810, $t(310) = -4.46$, $p < 0.0001$), less attractive (mean difference −1.320, $t(310) = -6.79$, $p < 0.0001$), and slightly less polite (mean difference −0.320, $t(310) = -2.531$, $p < 0.0119$) than the French did.

Competence

The ANOVA revealed a significant difference in the competence assessment of FSSC between New Zealand and France. French respondents rated FSSC significantly higher in competence than New Zealanders did ($F(6) = 10.38$, $p < 0.01$) (see Table 9 and Figure 3). Analysis of the seven competence items did show similarities across countries (see Table 8). Both New Zealand and French respondents associated FSSC with the same two positive competence traits: confident and competent (similar to MSSC). The top-ranking competence traits for FSSC in both countries were all positive: confident, competent, and credible. However, analysis of the seven competence items shows that New Zealand respondents rated FSSC significantly lower on all items than the French did, characterizing it as conveying low status (mean difference −1.580, $t(310) = -9.30$, $p < 0.0001$), being less persuasive (mean difference −1.130, $t(310) = -6.12$, $p < 0.0001$), less confident (mean difference −1.010, $t(310) = -6.29$, $p < 0.0001$), less credible (mean difference −0.930, $t(310) = -5.71$, $p < 0.0001$), less expert (mean difference −0.810, $t(310) = -5.30$, $p < 0.0001$), less competent (mean difference −0.550, $t(310) = -3.62$, $p < 0.0001$), and less powerful (mean difference −0.450, $t(310) = -2.62$, $p < 0.0093$) (see Table 8). The only negative competence trait the French associated with FSSC was weak, whereas New Zealanders characterized the voice as weak, low status, and not persuasive.

Table 8. Assessment of the female soft sell voice (FSS) in New Zealand and France, and New Zealand vs. France.

	New Zealand					France					Difference Between Countries		
Factor	M	SD	*t*-test	*p* Value	Voice characterization	M	SD	*t*-test	*p* Value	Voice characterization	Diff	t *t*-test	*p* Value
Warmth	5.07	1.64	8.911***	0.000	Seductive	5.88	1.46	14.250***	0.000	Seductive	−0.810	−4.46***	0.0001
	4.23	1.70	1.844**	0.067	Attractive	5.55	1.65	10.390***	0.000	Attractive	−1.320	−6.79***	0.0001
	5.20	1.48	11.059***	0.000	Pleasant	5.50	1.48	11.212***	0.000	Pleasant	−0.300	−1.752*	0.0807
	5.75	1.15	20.700***	0.000	Polite	6.06	1.00	22.752***	0.000	Polite	−0.310	−2.531**	0.0119
	4.89	1.55	7.900***	0.000	Sincere	4.83	1.68	5.472***	0.000	Sincere	0.060	0.324	0.7465
	4.53	1.50	4.790***	0.000	Trustworthy	4.76	1.57	5.345***	0.000	Trustworthy	−0.230	−1.301	0.1942
	5.31	1.24	14.504***	0.000	Humble	5.24	1.36	10.141***	0.000	Humble	−0.070	−0.469	0.6391
Competence	4.48	1.45	4.578***	0.000	Confident	5.49	1.29	12.869***	0.000	Confident	−1.010	−6.29***	0.0001
	2.74	1.39	−12.385***	0.000	Weak	3.19	1.62	−5.505***	0.000	Weak	−0.450	−2.62***	0.0093
	3.67	1.44	−3.141***	0.002	Low status	5.25	1.51	9.205***	0.000	High status	−1.580	−9.30***	0.0001
	4.55	1.27	5.944***	0.000	Competent	5.10	1.38	8.839***	0.000	Competent	−0.550	−3.62***	0.0003
	3.60	1.62	−3.413***	0.001	Not persuasive	4.73	1.56	5.152***	0.000	Persuasive	−1.130	−6.12***	0.0001
	4.10	1.31	1.058	0.292	Neither (1)	4.91	1.34	7.553***	0.000	Expert	−0.810	−5.30***	0.0001
	4.09	1.36	0.912	0.363	Neither (2)	5.02	1.48	7.609***	0.000	Credible	−0.930	−5.71***	0.0001

Note. *$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

The within-country *t*-tests (columns 4 and 9) examine whether the mean of each item (e.g., unpleasant vs. pleasant) for each country is equal to 4, which represents the midpoint of the 1–7 Likert scale.

The *t*-tests in column 13 reports whether there is a significant difference in voice characterizations between the two countries.

Voices are characterized as: (1) neither "expert" nor "not expert"; (2) neither "credible" nor "not credible."

Do respondents perceive male and female voices differently in terms of warmth and competence?

The paired *t*-tests conducted between MHS, FHS, MSS, and FSS gave a more precise indication about the differences in perceptions of warmth and competence toward the male and female voices within countries. Tables 10 and 11 present these within-country findings and illustrate how significantly each voice differs in perceived warmth and competence compared with the other voices.

Statistics indicate that all hard sell voices are perceived as significantly different from soft sell voices in terms of warmth and competence (see Tables 8 and 9 for statistics and Figure 3 for an overall visualization of findings).

Our statistics also reveal (see Tables 10 and 11 in bold) that within both hard sell and soft sell styles, male and female voices are perceived sometimes similarly, sometimes differently, in terms of warmth and competence. For the hard sell voices, the French found the male hard sell as sounding similarly average in competence as the female hard sell, $t(123) = -0.23$, $p = 0.816$, but as being warmer than the female hard sell voice; $t(123) = 2.92$, $p < 0.01$ (even though both MHS and FHS were judged as very low in warmth). New Zealanders who found both MHS and FHS competent, nevertheless found the female hard sell voice marginally more competent than the male hard sell voice; $t(187) = -0.18$, $p < 0.1$ and found the male hard sell and the female hard sell voice similarly low in warmth; $t(187) = -1.15$, $p = 0.25$.

For the soft sell voices, the French found the male and female soft sell voices similarly high in competence; $t(123) = -1.10$, $p = 0.27$, and similarly very high in warmth; $t(123) = -1.20$, $p = 0.23$. The most significant difference uncovered in this study was that New Zealanders judged

Table 9. Difference between countries for warmth and competence.

	Warmth					Competence				
Voice	New Zealand	France	Mean Diff	F Test	Df	New Zealand	France	Mean Diff	F Test	Df
Male hard sell	3.44	3.21	0.23	1.88*	6	4.78	4	0.78	6.77***	6
Female hard sell	3.32	2.81	0.51	3.43***	6	4.96	4.03	0.93	14.96***	6
Male soft sell	4.41	5.23	−0.82	13.06***	5	4.29	5	−0.71	6.74***	6
Female soft sell	5.01	5.4	−0.39	3.23**	5	3.89	4.85	−0.96	10.38***	6

Note. *$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

Table 10. Mean difference between each voice within each country: Warmth.

		MHS		FHS		MSS	
		France	NZ	France	NZ	France	NZ
FHS	France	**0.40** **2.92*****					
	NZ		**0.128** **1.15** **0.25**				
MSS	France	−2.02 −14.81***		−2.42 −18.15***			
	NZ		−0.97 −9.5 ***		−1.10 −10.12***		
FSS	France	−2.19 −16.06***		−2.60 −19.46***		**−.16** **−1.20** **0.23**	
	NZ		−1.56 −15.03***		−1.70 −15.35 ***		**−0.60** **−5.87*****

Note. *$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.
Cell data top to bottom: mean difference, *t*-test, *p* value.
FHS = female hard sell; FSS = female soft sell; MHS = male hard sell; MSS = male soft sell; NZ = New Zealand.

Table 11. Mean difference between each voice within each country: Competence.

		MHS		FHS		MSS	
		France	NZ	France	NZ	France	NZ
FHS	France	**−0.03** **−0.23** **0.816**					
	NZ		**−0.18** **−1.74***				
MSS	France	−1 −6.82***		−0.97 −7.44***			
	NZ		0.49 4.51***		0.67 6.42***		
FSS	France	−0.85 −5.72***		−0.82 −6.19***		**0.15** **1.10** **0.27**	
	NZ		0.89 7.93***		1.06 9.88***		**0.40** **3.60***

Note. *$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.
Cell data top to bottom: mean difference, *t*-test, *p* value.
FHS = female hard sell; FSS = female soft sell; MHS = male hard sell; MSS = male soft sell; NZ = New Zealand.

the male soft sell voice to be significantly more competent than the female soft sell voice; t(187) = 3.60, $p < 0.01$, but significantly less warm; t(187) = −5.87, $p < 0.01$.

Conclusions and implications

Theoretical implications

The purpose of this study was to explore whether Gen Z consumers' judgements about the warmth and competence of hard sell and soft sell advertising vocal delivery styles differ according to the environment in which they live. Our research advances our theoretical understanding in the fields of advertising and voice research in several ways. First, whereas existing studies have until now considered hard sell and soft sell appeals as being image or word-based, our study brings to light the contribution of voice to the study of these appeals, thus complementing what other authors have suggested constitutes hard sell and soft sell appeals (Okazaki, Mueller, and Taylor 2010b). Our study contributes to showing that vocal appeal is an important aspect of hard sell and soft sell and should not be overlooked or neglected. Future studies on hard sell or soft sell appeals should seek to design models that incorporate the impact of vocal styles.

Our research also contributes to enriching theory by suggesting new connections between concepts such as SCM's warmth and competence, advertising vocal styles, and brand positioning. Numerous marketing studies (see Halkias and Diamantopoulos 2020) have emphasized the significance of perceptions of warmth and competence in brand positioning, yet they overlook the contribution of voice to these perceptions. Our study addressed this gap by demonstrating that the soft sell and hard sell vocal styles do contribute to conveying specific warmth and competence personality traits. In line with research indicating that warmth and competence qualities can transfer to brands (Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012; Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010), we suggest that the ability of an advertising vocal style stimuli to convey warmth and competence personality traits can contribute to influencing how consumers, specifically Gen Z, perceive brands. Our study indicates that brands should pay careful attention when associating themselves with a specific type of voice as the identity characteristics of the voice may carry over some (un)desirable qualities that could enhance or damage their desired brand values and positioning. Our results paint a profile of the soft and hard sell vocal style, which may be useful as a basis for future research and for advertisers who may need guidance on which vocal style they should match with their brands, products, or services.

Finally, our study also contributes to theoretical development by elaborating a cross-cultural framework, which enables the isolation of character traits commonly associated with each vocal style within specific countries and across countries. This contrastive framework challenges the usual simplistic or ethnocentric assumption in advertising research about the universality of vocal characteristics. We aim to inspire future cross-cultural studies of advertising voices because only such research can begin the process of empirically isolating "universal" (i.e., similar across borders) as well as culturally specific perceptions of warmth and competence in advertising voices.

Practical implications

Our study uncovered significant findings that advertisers and brands should consider when targeting consumers, specifically members of Gen Z. The cross-cultural framework was particularly helpful in revealing both commonalities and differences in how consumers from two countries associate soft and hard sell advertising voices with warmth and competence. The commonalities underscore a universal assessment of hard and soft sell advertising vocal styles, while the unique characteristics of France and New Zealand provide valuable insights for advertisers working in or entering these specific markets.

Differences between countries

Our study uncovered significant differences in how consumers from two countries associate soft and hard sell advertising voices with warmth and competence. One notable difference was that French respondents rated soft sell voices very highly in both warmth and competence, whereas New Zealanders rated these soft sell voices significantly lower in competence (particularly the female soft sell) and warmth (especially the male soft sell) than the French. Regarding hard sell voices, a notable difference was that New Zealanders perceived them as significantly more competent and slightly warmer compared with the French. These differences between countries are substantial, but to understand them better, we need to delve deeper into each country's specificities.

French specificities

An important finding was that French respondents rated soft sell voices high in both warmth and competence and significantly higher in these attributes compared with hard sell voices. This finding shows the versatility of the soft sell vocal style in France: it can be used to convey high warmth but also high competence. This point was valid for both female and male soft sell voices, which were perceived as equally high in warmth and competence.

Hofstede's theory may help explain this French specificity. Indeed, in a relatively feminine country like France, a soft voice—whether male or female—that projects warmth may be preferred, because it aligns with the cultural expectations of a feminine culture. While further research is needed to corroborate this idea, this finding may mean that people in "feminine" countries may be more receptive to soft sell voices. In any case, we recommend that advertisers targeting the French market consider the potential preference for the soft sell vocal style.

Another interesting point to note is that French respondents' extremely positive rating of the soft sell voices corresponds to the dominance of the soft sell advertising appeal in that country. This result may be indicating a priming effect. In other words, French respondents may have rated highly the kind of voices they are used to hearing and rated lower the voices they less often hear in France. Therefore, our recommendation for advertisers aiming for acceptance in the French market—especially those that habitually take a conservative and risk averse approach to foreign markets—is that they should favor the soft sell style that the French rate highly for warmth and competence over the hard sell, unless they decide to take a communication risk.

Whereas the soft sell voices were received positively by the French, the hard sell voices were much less favored. Both male and female hard sell voices were seen as conveying low warmth

and average competence, with the female voice being rated the lowest in both dimensions. Interestingly, these findings do not align with research showing that higher-pitch voices are often judged as warmer in the Netherlands (Ko, Judd, and Stapel 2009), Poland (Oleszkiewicz et al. 2017; and China (Wu et al. 2023) and with U.S.-based research showing that faster speakers are perceived as competent (Brown 1980; Brown, Strong, and Rencher 1973, 1974, 1975; Smith et al. 1975; Street, Brady, and Putman 1983; Zuckerman and Miyake 1993). Advertisers should take note of these very low warmth ratings for the hard sell vocal style in France, particularly for the female hard sell. A clear recommendation is to avoid using the female hard sell voice in France, especially to convey warmth, because it is associated with numerous negative characteristics, including being perceived as unpleasant, unattractive, low status, impolite, untrustworthy, arrogant, insincere, and incompetent.

New Zealand specificities. In contrast, New Zealanders rated hard sell voices high in competence and low in warmth, with both male and female hard sell voices perceived as conveying similarly low warmth and similarly high competence. Consistent with Hofstede's cultural descriptions, individuals from New Zealand (a masculine country) did rate loud, fast, upbeat, commanding hard sell voices more favorably than soft sell voices. While further research is necessary to corroborate this idea, this finding may mean that people in "masculine" countries may be more receptive to hard sell voices. Therefore, in a masculine country such as New Zealand, a hard sell voice—whether male or female—that projects competence may be preferred, possibly because the power, confidence, persuasiveness, expertise, credibility, and high status attributed to the voice fits with the cultural expectations of that masculine culture. In any case, we recommend that advertisers targeting the New Zealand market consider using hard sell vocal styles, especially to convey competence.

The fact that New Zealanders rated hard sell voices significantly higher in competence and significantly lower in warmth than soft sell voices suggests that the hard sell vocal style frequently used in New Zealand (male of female) is not as versatile as advertisers may think because it mostly conveys competence, not warmth. Advertisers in New Zealand, who frequently use this vocal style may therefore do so without carefully considering the implications. Our recommendation is that advertisers in New Zealand use the hard sell vocal style, whether male or female, to convey competence. This style is perceived by New Zealanders as confident, powerful, high status, competent, persuasive, expert and credible, making it ideal for advertisers who aim to convey competence rather than warmth.

A surprising finding was that the soft sell vocal style, despite its infrequent use in New Zealand, was rated by New Zealanders as above average in warmth and adequately competent. This finding suggests that advertisers may be underusing soft sell voices in New Zealand. Our recommendation is that advertisers take advantage of New Zealanders' high warmth rating for the soft sell vocal style and use it more frequently. To convey the most warmth, they should use the female soft sell voice, which rated significantly higher in warmth compared with the male soft sell, and which elicited voice characterizations such as seductive, attractive, pleasant, polite, sincere, trustworthy, and humble. To convey competence, advertisers could also use the male soft sell vocal style, which was rated significantly higher in competence compared with the female soft sell voice and which elicited voice characterizations such as confident, competent, expert, and credible.

Commonalities: Perceptions of hard sell advertising voices as conveying low warmth

Overall, our study revealed that in both countries hard sell voices, both male and female, were perceived as competent, particularly in New Zealand, but did not convey any warmth, instead being associated with low sincerity, politeness, pleasantness, seductiveness, attractiveness, and trust. This finding is consistent with research showing that the faster the speaking rate, the less warm but the more competent, persuasive, expert a voice is perceived (Apple, Streeter, and Kraus 1979; Brooke and Ng 1986; Brown, Giles, and Thakerar 1985; Jiang and Pell 2017; Miller et al. 1976; Smith et al. 1975; Street, Brady, and Putman 1983; Thakerar and Giles 1981) and with research

showing that individuals who speak loudly are perceived as powerful speakers and as such are perceived in positive terms as more competent, confident, and credible (Bradac, Mulac, and House 1988; Brooke and Ng 1986; Jiang and Pell 2017; Miller et al. 1976; Page and Balloun 1978). However, respondents' ratings of our high-pitch hard sell voices as competent, confident, powerful, persuasive, credible, and expert do not align with previous research that associates high pitch with low competence, low expertise, low powerfulness, and low credibility (Apple, Streeter, and Kraus 1979; Guyer, Fabrigar, and Vaughan-Johnston 2019; Jiang and Pell 2017; Klofstad, Anderson, and Peters 2012; Sorokowski et al. 2019), except in the context of France, where the female hard sell voice was perceived low on these aspects. The implication of these findings for advertisers is that if their strategic goal is to convey competence without focusing on warmth, the hard sell vocal style is an effective choice in both countries, but particularly in New Zealand.

Commonalities: Perceptions of soft sell advertising voices as conveying high warmth

Conversely, in both countries, soft sell voices—male and female—were perceived as warm and as conveying sincerity, politeness, humility, trust, and pleasantness. This finding is consistent with research showing that speakers who use normal or slower rates are considered more socially attractive more and benevolent (more polite, likeable, kind, sincere, dependable, sociable) than fast speakers (Brown, Giles, and Thakerar 1985; Smith et al. 1975; Street, Brady, and Putman 1983), with research showing that individuals who speak softly are perceived as being more sincere (Page and Balloun 1978), and with research associating low-pitch voices with attractiveness (Apple, Streeter, and Kraus 1979; Chattopadhyay et al. 2003; Guyer, Fabrigar, and Vaughan-Johnston 2019; Jiang and Pell 2017; Klofstad, Anderson, and Peters 2012; Sorokowski et al. 2019). The implication for advertisers is that, if their strategic goal is to convey warmth, the soft sell vocal style is an effective choice.

Ultimately, the consistency of these study findings—perception of soft sell as high warmth and hard sell as low warmth across two country environments—suggests there may be a universal perception of hard sell and soft sell voices in relation to warmth and competence.

Soft sell as universal to convey high warmth and competence

Our study indicates that the soft sell vocal style has an advantage over the hard sell. In both countries, the soft sell vocal style conveyed good levels of competence and significantly more warmth than the hard sell style; it can therefore be considered the most versatile vocal style. Its versatility should allow brands to cultivate a combination of warmth and competence, which, as researchers have shown, results in positive emotional consequences such as feelings of admiration for a brand as well as higher purchase intention (Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012; Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010). This ability of the soft sell vocal style to convey good levels of competence and much higher levels of warmth than the hard sell style also aligns with other non-voice-related research showing that the soft sell appeal generates more favorable impressions and less irritation than hard sell (Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra 1999; Amine, Chao, and Arnold 2005; Okazaki, Mueller, and Diehl 2013). Our cross-cultural framework therefore contributes to validating earlier findings and suggests that the soft sell style may be "universally" the most appropriate vocal style to reach consumer audiences as part of a global consumer culture positioning. We therefore recommend that, universally, advertisers should use a soft sell approach to convey or reinforce perceptions of warmth. Additionally, they should be aware that the soft sell vocal style conveys adequate perceptions of competence.

Gender effects

Interestingly, as illustrated in Figure 3, in each country, judgements of warmth and competence of hard sell or soft sell voices were remarkably similar regardless of the gender of the voice,

which suggests that judgements of hard sell and soft sell vocal styles are largely not determined by gender "stereotypicality." The only major difference in gender perception was New Zealanders' perception of the female soft sell vocal style as significantly warmer than the male soft sell, and the male soft sell as significantly more competent than the female soft sell. This finding aligns with stereotypical views of female voices as being warmer (Newcombe and Arnkoff 1979) and low-pitch male voices as being more competent (Klofstad 2016; Ko, Judd, and Stapel 2009; Tsantani et al. 2016; Zuckerman, Hodgins, and Miyake 1990) and with New Zealand's high score on Hofstede's masculine index. Indeed, in a masculine country it is unsurprising that a male voice would be perceived more competent than a female voice.

Another difference in gender perception worth noting was French respondents' perception of the female hard sell voice as significantly less warm than the male hard sell. This assessment of the female hard sell as extremely low in warmth contrasts with previous research which has shown that high-pitch fast female voices convey likeability (Parker and Borrie 2018) and are perceived as more attractive than lower-pitch female voices (Borkowska and Pawlowski 2011; Hodges-Simeon, Gaulin, and Puts 2010; Re et al. 2012). However, our finding is not entirely surprising given that French culture values traditional feminine traits such as nurturing, friendliness, and emotional expressiveness (Hofstede Insights 2023). Consequently, a fast, loud, high-pitch, commanding female voice may clash with the cultural expectations of that feminine culture.

Overall, our research highlights some cross-border similarities: soft sell voices universally convey warmth, and hard sell voices do not. Additionally, soft sell voices are more versatile than hard sell voices as they can convey both high warmth and adequate competence. However, advertisers should also consider cultural idiosyncrasies when designing advertising vocal strategies, and those operating in or entering the French and New Zealand markets should pay particular attention to the unique cultural nuances highlighted in our study. Ultimately, vocal strategies should be deliberate and not left to chance.

Limitations and further research

Our research findings are based on two specific advertising environments, New Zealand and France. More research such as this is needed, using other countries, non-western for example, to build a more solid body of knowledge on the cross-cultural research of advertising voices and to make further claims about strategy. It would also be interesting to conduct further research in several masculine and feminine countries to verify whether there is indeed a preference for hard sell or soft sell vocal styles in those countries.

Our study is based on a sample of young consumers from Gen Z and therefore its results may not be applicable to the older population or the entire population of these two countries. Further studies using samples incorporating different age groups would help validate our study's findings.

Our focus was to provide innovative cross-cultural findings on perceptions of hard sell and soft sell voices by keeping the design of this study as simple as possible. Given our already complex cross-cultural framework, we deliberately limited mediation effects and eliminated the impact of elements such as product category, product involvement, country of origin, which could have further influenced respondents' assessments of warmth and competence of the voices and may have led to consumer emotions not linked to the voices themselves. We hope this research can serve as a basis for further studies that could incorporate some of these variables. These data would further enrich cross-cultural advertising research of hard sell and soft sell vocal appeals.

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