

Product type associations with hard sell and soft sell vocal styles: A cross cultural exploration.

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Abstract

This study explores whether consumers' associate hard sell and soft sell vocal styles with specific products. The research, conducted across two countries (France and New Zealand), helps us understand whether these associations are universal or differ according to culture. The study shows that assessments of product-advertising vocal style fittingness are mostly consistent across countries but that cultural idiosyncrasies also need to be considered by advertisers.

This study explores product-voice associations made by consumers in relation to two vocal delivery styles: hard sell, and soft sell. Taking a cross cultural approach based on two countries, France and New Zealand, we explore whether these associations are universal or country dependent. Such contrastive framework will contribute to the cross-cultural de-naturalisation of advertising researchers' assumption about the universality of advertising vocal specificities in relation to product-advertising vocal style fittingness. The aim of the research is to give an indication about consumers' expectations in terms of vocal style-product match within and across countries, and to help advertisers make better informed decisions on how to match an advertising vocal style with their product.

Hard sell and soft sell advertising

Hard sell and soft sell appeals provide very distinct ways of communicating with audiences (see Beard 2004; Haygood 2016). Hard-sell, as a general appeal, is typically defined as “an aggressive, high-pressure sales practice or promotion” and soft-sell as “a low-key sales approach that relies on gentle persuasion” (Ammer 2013, 1). The most complete academic definition of hard and soft-sell appeals is offered by Okazaki, Mueller, and Taylor (2010a; 2010b); it characterizes hard-sell as a direct, explicit, rational, information-based approach encouraging a quick sale, and soft-sell as using indirect, implicit, image-based, emotional appeals. These definitions are helpful, however, surprisingly, they never mention the important contribution of voice to the hard sell and soft sell appeals and as a result, what constitutes the hard-sell or the soft-sell vocal delivery style has not been defined in academia (Akbari, 2015; Butt et al., 2017; Okazaki et al., 2013). This lack of research is compensated

by the work of voice acting professionals who define the hard-sell vocal style as being fast, loud, high to mid pitch, upbeat, conveying energy and enthusiasm (Baker 2014; Expertvillage 2008a; Terzza 2018) and the soft-sell vocal style as being slow, soft, low to mid pitch and conveying warmth and ‘allure’ (Expertvillage 2008b). The distinction between hard-sell and soft-sell styles therefore revolves around three main elements working in interaction: speech rate, loudness, and pitch. Advertising messages, whether hard or soft sell, constantly exploit these three characteristics of the voice, often exaggerating them in order to make advertising messages salient and identifiable as such (Desmarais 2000; Medrado, Ferreira, and Behlau 2005; Rodero and Potter 2021).

Hard sell and soft sell acceptance

Little research has been conducted on how well hard sell and soft sell appeals are perceived by consumers. Overall, research shows the soft-sell appeal (not taking account vocal characteristics) is better accepted than hard-sell which tends to induce much more advertising irritation (Alden et al., 1999; Amine et al., 2005; Okazaki et al., 2013). For example, Desmarais, Vignolles & Mukherjee’s (2024) cross cultural study suggests the soft-sell vocal style can be considered best, universally, to reach consumer audiences than the hard-sell style and that it may be the most appropriate vocal style as part of a global consumer culture positioning (GCCP) strategy. They also show there are slight country differences, with for example, French consumers liking the soft sell vocal style more and the hard sell vocal style less than New Zealanders (see Desmarais and Vignolles, 2019).

Product categories, vocal appeals and vocal styles

Surprisingly, there aren’t any studies investigating the fittingness of hard sell and soft sell appeals to product types and in the few studies of hard sell and soft sell appeals (those not considering vocal characteristics) the suitability of product type with these appeals only receives peripheral attention. For instance, in a cross-cultural study of US and Japanese

advertising, Okazaki et al (2010b) used the product categories of automobiles, cell phones, and alcoholic beverages, for which “soft-sell and hard sell appeals were equally likely to be employed” (p.26) but did not analyse whether each of these three product categories would be better suited for hard sell or soft sell. We can nevertheless make a few inferences about advertising appeal-product type fittingness but from only a few studies. For example, Alden and Steenkamp (1999) showed GCCP advertisements primarily used soft sell appeals and were also most frequently used for durable, high-technology goods, relatively frequently with household, personal care, and low-tech durable consumer products, and least frequently for food products.

Some studies tend to suggest fittingness between product and advertising appeal may not vary across cultures. For example, Okazaki et al. (2013) showed an advertisement for a brand of watch was better received across several countries (US, Germany, Italy, France, and Japan) when using a soft sell approach, therefore suggesting a form of universality in consumers’ perception of that fittingness. Conversely, other studies suggest perception of fittingness between product and advertising appeal may be influenced by culture. For example, in the context of Iran, Akbari et al (2015) showed emotional appeals (soft sell) create a positive effect on ad attitude for a low involvement product (sunscreen), and rational appeals (hard sell) create a positive effect on ad attitude for a high involvement product (laptop).

The important point to note is that these studies’ results show some level of universality but also cultural idiosyncrasy in the fittingness between products and advertising appeals. Surprisingly, however, there has not been any studies exploring these paradoxical results further, especially in relation to the hard sell and soft sell vocal styles. Our cross-cultural study proposes to fill this gap. It provides a framework to explore whether the established advertising cultural environment within which consumers ‘exist’ works as a

priming environment (Yoo, 2008), influencing their choice of fit between a vocal style and a product type. To date there has not been any studies investigating the fittingness of hard sell and soft sell vocal styles to product types.

Product associations in advertising

As noted above, the research into the fittingness of hard sell and soft sell appeals to product types is extremely scant and research investigating the fittingness of hard sell and soft sell vocal styles to product types is inexistent. However, much has been written on how certain product types are associated with gender in advertising. For decades now, the role adopted by men and women in the media and particularly in advertising has consistently been found to be heavily stereotyped and often linked with certain types of products (Cortese 2016; Frith et al. 2010; Gunter, 1995). Cross cultural studies (Matthes et al. 2016) and meta studies (Eisend 2010; Furnham and Lay, 2019; Furnham and Mak, 1999) have shown how associations between gender and product types have been stable over time and across countries; with women consistently being portrayed in advertisements in a domestic situation promoting personal beauty/body care products, medical products, as well as household and cleaning products, whereas males tend to be portrayed engaged in leisure/outdoor activities and appear in advertisements promoting cars and automotive accessories, as well as technology (telecommunications, electronics, computers).

Obviously, through this stereotyping, a certain knowledge about the nature of men and women's roles is formulated and disseminated by advertising messages. In line with cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986; 2002) or 'distorted mirror' arguments (Pollay, 1986, 1987), it has been argued, that such stereotypical representations learned from advertisements are transferred to, and learned by audiences and continue to foster a distorted common public vision and expectation about men and women's roles (Cortese, 2016; Gunter, 1995; Prieler & Centeno 2013, Prieler, 2016). Using male and female hard sell and

soft sell voices, our study will explore the gender associations consumers make with various product categories. Our research **questions are** the following:

- (1) Which types of products do consumers associate with hard sell voices or soft sell voices? Are there any country differences?
- (2) Does the gender of the voice influence consumers' association of that voice with specific types of products? Are there any country differences?

Method

Our study answered these questions by exploring consumers' reactions to four advertising voices (one male and one female hard-sell, one male and one female soft-sell) via an online questionnaire administered on the Qualtrics platform in New Zealand and in France. The voices were recorded by professional voice artists who all had extensive experience recording advertising messages for prominent radio and television channels (see table 1 for the characteristics of the voices). For consistency, all four messages were recorded in the English language and all voice artists were native English speakers. The English language was selected as it has become a universal language and is familiar and understood in both New Zealand and France.

The Message

We tested "single-voice copy" defined by Alburger (1999) as a message delivered in its entirety by a solo performer. With input from our voice professionals, we designed a neutral message that could be adapted to both hard-sell and soft-sell vocal approaches. The message was designed to be neutral but also non-product-specific so respondents would first and foremost focus on the voice characteristics of the advertising message (see table 2 for the text used for each voice).

Participants

A total of 312 undergraduate students from two business schools served as participants in this study: New Zealand (n = 188) and France (n = 124). The average age of respondents across both countries was 22.79. Respondents' gender was evenly split with 51% female and 49% male across both countries.

Procedure

The research was completed via a Qualtrics questionnaire administered at specific times in university computer laboratories in France and New Zealand. Respondents were asked to listen to the four advertising voices designed for the study using headphones and the same volume setting. The four voices were presented randomly to avoid bias. For each voice they listened to, respondents were asked to indicate three products or services the voice would be suited for. In total, 372 products or services were suggested by our French respondents and 564 were suggested by our New Zealand respondents.

Coding

The product categories used in this study were not pre-designed but identified following each voice's specificities. Products suggested by respondents were categorised as belonging to a product category; new product categories were added when needed, and some product categories were grouped together. These product categories were then compared to several other studies' classifications (Furnham, & Farragher, 2000; Matthes et al. 2016; Michelle, 2011; Prieler, 2016; Whitelock & Jackson, 1997, Whitelock & Rey, 1998; Zandpour, Chang, & Catalano, 1992) and, as a result, slightly modified and refined. Two coders, one male and one female both fluent in English and French were involved in the coding process. To ensure reliability of coding both coded one voice independently and subsequently discussed their findings. The rest of the data was coded by both coders. Disagreement between the coders was resolved via discussion and consensus.

Findings

The first step in this study was to qualitatively explore which products and services were associated with each voice. Table 3 shows the products and services most cited in the most important categories for each voice. We observe that across countries, soft sell voices (either male and female) are associated with products representing indulgence/pampering, sensuality, secrecy, health, wellbeing, protection while hard sell voices are associated with more practical, functional, less indulgent products and more traditionally masculine, products.

As well as associating voices with products, many respondents spontaneously described their suggested product in more details. In both countries, soft sell voices were associated with relaxation, exclusivity, luxury, high quality whereas hard sell voices were associated with promotion, discount, low cost, low end/low quality products. (see table 4 for the most recurrent qualifiers associated with the products cited).

Next, we investigated the association between different types of voices across the two countries and the various product categories by conducting a Factorial Correspondence Analysis (Benzecri, 1992). Based on the responses provided by respondents and via a cross-coding of the various types of products or services coded into categories, we produced a contingency table of Category x Voice in a 21 x 8 format: 21 categories and 4 voices (2 (Hard Sell / Soft Sell) x 2 (Male / Female)) for each country (France / New Zealand). An initial analysis of the 3,047 category-voice pairs allowed us to determine a link between the two variables. In other words, the distribution of categories according to voice type was not random ($\chi^2[140] = 2642.96$; $p < .000$). We observed a proportion of inertia represented by the axes (68.3%) that was satisfactory but moderate, mainly due to a small difference between male and female voices. Therefore, we opted for a contingency table of 21 x 4, that is, 21 categories and 2 voices (Hard Sell and Soft Sell – combining male and female voices) for each country (see table 5). This confirms the existing link between the product or service

category and the voice type according to the country ($\chi^2[60] = 1722.24$; $p < .000$). The first two axes allow us to represent 89.8% of the inertia captured by our solution.

Next, we used a biplot (see Figure 1) summarizing the row points and column points tables. We observe that the categories (row points) "Retail," "House Cleaning," "Sport," "Automobile," "DIY & Gardening" display high and positive scores on the horizontal axis, contrasting on this dimension with categories such as "Seduction," "Cinema," "Books," "Relaxation," "Health & Well Being." This dimension could be summarized on a spectrum ranging from functional needs (right side of the graph) to more personal needs (left side). On this dimension, the column points oppose each other according to the type of voice (Hard Sell for positive values, and Soft Sell for negative values). Thus, it could be concluded that this horizontal dimension contrasts "Hard Sell" voices associated with categories of consumption that are practical, functional, and likely more outwardly or activity-oriented; and "Soft Sell" voices associated with categories of consumption that are more introspective, related to escape, well-being, or relaxation.

Regarding the vertical axis, the categories with high positive scores on this axis are "DIY & Gardening," "Baby," "Homeware," "Public & Societal Services," "Senior & Funerals Products and Services," whereas the categories in opposition are "Food & Beverage," "House Cleaning," "Toys," "Cinema & Streaming," "Entertainment." This dimension seems to contrast categories of products and services related to transformational and fundamental experiences whether on the human aspect (birth of a baby, old age, funerals, public and societal services) or objects belonging to them (home or garden works) with categories of products and services that contribute to the satisfaction of pleasures and everyday needs (cinema, toys, food, beverage, etc.) and sensuality. In other words, we have, on one side, products that support long-term changes or significant events, and on the other side, acquisitions of goods for immediate pleasure and daily comfort. It is interesting to note

that on the side of the voices, there is no notable difference along this axis. However, there is an opposition between New Zealand consumers (top of the axis) and French consumers (bottom of the axis). An in-depth study of the two cultures would be necessary to further explore whether New Zealand consumers might more readily associate sales arguments with transformational products, and French consumers with everyday products.

Finally, we analysed product-voice gender associations to detect any stereotypical associations between the gender of a voice and products associated with it. Our analysis shows that some product categories were much more associated with female voices than with male voices.

Conclusion and implications

Our study reveals universalities and idiosyncrasies in relation to consumers' associations between products and vocal styles.

Universalities

Across countries, the soft sell vocal style was associated with products related to transformational, fundamental and introspective experiences. These products and services contribute to the satisfaction of pleasures and everyday comfort needs and relate to leisure and sensuality. The soft sell vocal style was also associated, across countries, with products linked to relaxation, exclusivity, luxury, and quality. For practitioners, it can be suggested that the soft sell vocal style can provide a good 'conventional' association for products wishing to communicate indulgence, pampering, sensuality, secrecy, escape, health, wellbeing, protection.

On the other hand, across countries, the hard sell vocal style was associated with categories of consumption that are less indulgent, more practical, functional, more outwardly or activity-oriented and more traditionally masculine. The hard sell vocal style was also heavily associated with promotion, discount, low cost, low end/low quality products. For practitioners, it can be suggested that the hard sell vocal style can provide a good 'conventional' association

for products wishing to communicate the elements above. Advertisers who want to follow conventional wisdom, should use hard sell vocal styles for functional categories and consider direct and argument-driven messages for products in categories noted on the right of the horizontal axis (Figure 1). On the other hand, those advertisers who wish to stand out from the crowd may decide to break this convention and take a communication risk by using soft sell voices for these traditionally hard sell products.

Idiosyncrasies

In terms of idiosyncrasies, we observed that New Zealand consumers associate soft sell voices with the categories in the top left quadrant of Figure 1 (Books, relaxation, health, wellbeing, senior, funerals public service, societal). They also somewhat associate the hard sell voices with the product categories of DIY gardening and Homeware. For France, we observe that consumers soft sell vocal style for the categories in the bottom left quadrant of Beauty, entertainment, seduction, cinema, streaming. They also associate the hard sell vocal style with the categories of food and beverage, house cleaning and retail.

These associations are clearly distinct and may be due to cultural priming, in other words to respondents' familiarity with the NZ cultural advertising landscape and the product associations it frequently represents. Campaigns in New Zealand and France could thus benefit from customization. Again, recognizing these cultural idiosyncrasies, advertisers can position themselves traditionally by using the usual voice for a particular product or decide to take a risk by breaking the cultural communication conventions.

Finally, our study shows consumers associate the gender of a voice with certain product categories. These stereotypical associations are in line with many other studies that have shown that female advertising characters continue to be associated with stereotypically feminine products such as body-care, domestic and household products, therefore

reinforcing the idea women have a life based at home and dominated by family parenthood and that men are more practically and leisure oriented.

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Table 1: Acoustic characteristics of the voices.

	Hard sell voices		Soft sell voices	
	Female hard sell	Male hard sell	Female soft sell	Male soft sell
Length (seconds)	15	16	30	27
Words per minute	224	210	112	124
Average Pitch (Hz)	394	268	181	150
Volume (dB)	85	84	76	76

Voice are available at the following addresses:

Soft sell female <https://youtu.be/uMFbgAKrkog>

Soft sell male <https://youtu.be/lBmNE7cQ5gU>

Hard sell female <https://youtu.be/0BmxU5hAlks>

Hard sell male https://youtu.be/viONmCR_UgI

Table 2: Text used for all voices.

<i>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, grey, yellow, green or white. You can reach us by phone, fax, or visit our website. Call us now for an obligation free quote.</i>

Table 3: Products and services most cited in the most important categories.

	France	New Zealand
Female Hard Sell voice	Produits alimentaires : « produits alimentaire », poisson, légumes, céréales, restauration rapide, épicerie, soda, viande Household/cleaning products : produit de nettoyage/nettoyant, d'entretien, managers, lessive, produit vaisselle, Personal beauty care : produits minceur/pour régime, produits d'hygiène, gel douche, shampoo, Clothing : Vêtement bas de gamme, fripe, joaillerie premier prix, chaussure, maroquinerie. Homeware/Furniture : Ameublement de jardin, meuble bas de gamme,	Furniture/homeware: beds/bedding, appliances, carpets, rugs, vaccums, kitchen ware, curtains Clothing/wearable: “clothing/clothes”, footwear, cheap women’s clothing Hardware/DIY: Paint, hardware, building supplies/service, plumbing service, gardening. Automobile: car products/service
Male Hard Sell voice	Automobile: car, car accessories, car wash, car rental, cheap car Food and beverage: food, fast food, fish, restaurant, beer Cleaning product: cleaning product, laundry,	DIY/Bricolage: paint, building/builders/contractors, hardware, outdoor, tools, tiles/tiling, machinery, plumbing. Homeware/furniture/household appliances: furniture, carpet, bed, appliances, rug, kitchen items. Automobile: second hand cars, et mechanical repairs, tyres
Female Soft Sell voice	Food: Chocolats, confiserie, yogurt Cosmetics /beauty products: “produit de beauté” parfum, maquillage Furniture: canapes, literie Clothing/wearable: lingerie, bijoux, maroquinerie, chaussures de luxe) Relaxation: Spa, massage relaxant, Entertainment/holidays/travel: Hotel, voyage, compagnie aérienne Seduction: site de rencontre, service de charme, telephone rose, produit pour adulte, préservatifs, sex toys	Food: chocolate, coffee Cosmetics /beauty products: hair products, perfume, body wash, nail polish, lipstick, make up. Relaxation: Spa, massage therapy, retreat, aroma therapy, meditation, yoga, private romantic getaway Furniture: Beds, bedroom furniture, carpet, sofa Clothing/wearable: lingerie, women’s clothing, jewelery Homeware: Candles, sleepware (pillows, linen), kitchenware Seduction: Hotline, adult services/entertainment/toys, condoms
Male Soft sell voice	Entertainment/holidays/travel: hotel, travel, holidays, tourism Car: car, luxury car Insurance/banks/real estate: Insurance, banking, real estate, lawyer Food: food, restaurant, alcool Furniture: couch, bed Electronic: phone, informatics, multimedia	Furniture: “furniture”, beds, carpet, garden/outdoor furniture, sofa Insurance/banks/real estate: Insurance, Financial, banking, real estate, Accountancy, Lawyer Homeware: “Homeware”, sleepware, curtains Food: Chocolate, Wine, Fast food, Sweets, Beer, tea Clothing/wearable: shoes, Jacket jewelery, suit Bricolage/gardening: Paint, lawnmower/ing, gardening, Tools Relaxation: Spa, treatments, retreats

Table 4: Most recurrent qualifiers associated with products for each voice.

	France	New Zealand
Female Hard Sell voice	Promotion/nelle (20), discount (10), soldes (6), bas de gamme (5), produit cheap (2), mauvaise qualité (1), premier prix (2), low cost (1), offre de courte durée (1). Voice associated to distribution types such as: supermarché (16) grande surface (4), marché (7), foire (3).	Sales (46), clearance (10), selling (7), cheap (6), infomercials (5), promotion (2), low end (2), bargain (2), limited sales (2), discount (2), end of line stock (1), specials (1), merchandise (1), as seen on TV products (1), bulk (1). Voice associated to distribution types such as: warehouse (12), supermarket (6), retail (6)
Male Hard Sell voice	Promo/tion/nelle (22), soldes (5), télé achat (5), flash (4), bas de gamme (4), vendeur (3), discount (2), commercial (2), téléshopping (2), offre (2), réduction (2), occasion (2), peu cher (1), faible valeur ajoutée (1), % off (1), vente en gros (1), vente à la sauvette (1), démonstrateur (1), mise en avant (1), excitée (1), agressive (1), extrême (1), révolutionnaire (1), exclusivité (1). Voice associated to distribution types such as: supermarché (10), marché (4), grande distribution (3), grande surface (3), grande consommation (2), grand magasin (1), marques de distributeurs (1).	Sales (48), selling (10), deals (6), clearance (5), discount (4), cheap (3), infomercials (3), low quality (1), limited time offers (1), end-of-season sales, promotion (1). Voice associated to distribution types such as: warehouse (11), supermarket (8), retail (9).
Female Soft Sell voice	Luxe (12), beauté (12), offre exceptionnelle (2), haut de gamme (8), précieux (1), pro (1), relaxant/ation (13), beauté (13), détente (4), bien être (4), féminin (3), charme (2), paradisiaque (1), pornographique (1). Voice not associated to any type of distribution.	Beauty (22), relaxing/relaxation (8), luxury (5), exclusive (3), high end (2), expensive (2), sophisticated (1), high quality (1), high class (1), fancy (1), fine (dining) (1), new (1), serious (1), care (1). Voice not associated to any type of distribution.
Male Soft Sell voice	Haut de gamme (10), luxe (8), relaxant/ation (5), promotion (4), charme (2), masculin (2), gamme moyenne (1), produit phare (1), Produit à fort potentiel (1), produit révolutionnaire (1), magique (1), sensuel (1), détente (1), explication (1). Voice not associated to any type of distribution.	Care (7), relaxation/ing (5), beauty (3) exclusive (1) professional (1), high end (1), expensive (1), luxury (1), new (1), antique (1), low price (1), trivial (1), multi-purpose (1). Voice not associated to any type of distribution.

Table 5: Contingency table

Category	HS (Fr)	SS (Fr)	Voice		Active Margin
			HS (NZ)	SS (NZ)	
Entertainment	17	108	13	51	189
Beauty	14	75	14	74	177
Automobile	45	32	104	26	207
Sport	33	8	56	14	111
House_cleaning	72	4	47	13	136
Food_beverage	86	26	21	51	184
Relaxation	0	40	1	81	122
Clothing	26	44	37	67	174
Seduction	2	54	1	43	100
DIY_Gardening	21	6	139	74	240
Health_WellBeing	0	25	0	65	90
Senior_funerals	0	9	0	35	44
Homeware	49	47	320	219	635
Insurance_Bank	13	53	9	83	158
Public_Societal	0	6	1	22	29
Electronic	32	32	48	17	129
Retail	96	1	106	6	209
Cinema_Streaming	2	20	0	9	31
Toys	10	11	6	5	32
Books	0	14	0	26	40
Baby	0	1	0	9	10
Active Margin	518	616	923	990	3047

Figure 1: Biplot

