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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Perceptions of Hard Sell and Soft Sell Vocal Styles across Countries: Lessons from France and New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This study explores soft sell and hard sell vocal appeals across two different countries, France and New Zealand. We use quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze consumers' familiarity with, and attitudes towards, hard sell (fast, loud, high to mid pitch, upbeat voice conveying energy and enthusiasm) and soft sell (slow, soft, low to mid pitch voice conveying warmth and allure) vocal advertising messages. Our results indicate that consumers' vocal preference depend on their previous experiences and culture, thus global marketers should take into consideration cultural idiosyncrasies when designing advertising vocal strategies.

KEYWORDS

Advertising; cross-cultural; hard-sell; soft-sell; voice

Introduction

An important element of any advertising message is the voice used to catch and hold customers' attention. This element is especially fundamental in radio, television, and digital devices where voices are used to reach consumers on a cognitive and emotional level and to "motivate the listener to take some kind of action" (Alburger, 1999, p. 2). As Alburger (1999) noted, a voice artist, in its role as a storyteller and salesperson, must be "able to convey a wide range of attitudes, personality, delivery, and emotions" (p. 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/ton) (p. 45). Despite this important role of voices in advertising, the subject has not attracted much attention from advertising and marketing scholars and has never attracted the attention of cross-cultural researchers; as a result, all studies conducted so far have been single-country studies.

These single-country studies of advertising voices have nevertheless shown that selecting appropriate voices can provide advertisers with several benefits. For instance, the voice used in an advertising message can play an important role in attracting consumers' attention by helping the message break through clutter, conveying information about a brand's image or functionality, generating favorable attitudes and credibility toward a message, and enhancing or hindering brand and commercial recall (Chattopadhyay et al., 2003; Gélinas-Chebat et al., 1996; Rawlins Schlinger et al., 1983; Vann et al., 1987). Surprisingly, all these single country studies of advertising voice conducted in different country environments all overlook the impact of culture on their results. They assume that their findings are universal and never conclude, or even suggest in their limitations, that findings should only be valid in the country environment in which the study was conducted. This is all the more surprising as there is a considerable amount of research to support the idea that advertising and culture are inextricably bound (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Cho et al., 1999; Czarnecka et al., 2018; De Mooij, 2018; Lin, 2001; Mueller, 1996, 1987; Nevett, 1992), that advertising is "a cultural phenomenon, culturally inspired and created within the expectations of a culture" (Taylor et al.,1996, p. 2) and that consumers' attitude

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toward advertising may differ across countries (Andrews et al., 1991; Dianoux et al., 2014; La Ferle et al., 2008; Lysonski & Pollay, 1990; Wang et al., 2019). There is also a small body of literature in the field of psychology (not related to advertising) suggesting 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 et al., 2001; Waarama, 2015; Waaramaa et al., 2021; Waarama & Leisiö, 2013).

Using a contrastive framework, blending quantitatively and qualitatively oriented strategies, we engage in a cross-cultural de-naturalization of advertising researchers' beliefs about the universality of advertising vocal specificities. More specifically, we extend existing research on soft sell and hard sell advertising appeals to the vocal domain because, surprisingly, scholarly work has not paid attention to the input of voice into these two distinct appeals. This lack of research means that we do not understand well the impact of hard-sell and soft-sell advertising vocal delivery styles on consumers' attitudes toward advertisements.

Our study takes an audience research perspective to try to understand whether consumers' attitude toward these advertising vocal delivery styles (hard sell and soft sell) differs according to the environment in which they live. The study takes the country or "nation" as the unit of the study. A country constitutes an appropriate unit of analysis of advertising when the objective of the study is to establish national, rather than cultural, views toward some phenomenon (Clark, 1990; Desmarais, 2007; Samiee & Jeong, 1994) and indeed, in most empirical cross cultural studies, a country rather than a culture forms the basis of research (see Czarnecka et al., 2018; Mehta et al., 2011). Our study therefore focuses on exploring how advertising works as part of "national culture;" it considers advertising as a national/cultural phenomenon working within the boundaries of the national media landscape.

Our study takes a multimethod approach to quantitatively and qualitatively assess consumers' affective liking judgments of these vocal delivery styles in two countries (New Zealand and France). Additionally, to uncover whether consumers' preferences are universal or influenced by their "advertising cultural environment" we explore whether their preference for a vocal style (hard sell or soft sell) correlates with their familiarity with it (due to repeated exposure to this style in their cultural environment).

We specifically explore consumers' attitude toward the following vocal styles: male hard-sell (MHS), female hard-sell (FHS), male soft-sell (MSS), female soft-sell (FSS), and gender-combined "overall hard-sell vocal style" (HSMF/Hard sell male and female) and the "overall soft-sell vocal style" (SSMF/Soft sell male and female). We are not researching whether a vocal style is better suited for a specific product or target, or whether micro elements taken in isolation—such as pitch, loudness, syllable speed, or intonation—increase credibility or information processing. Instead of focusing on such micro elements, we propose a macro cultural approach to the broad hard and soft-sell vocal delivery styles. We wish to explore whether there are country differences in the way consumers assess these and whether specific vocal styles may be better accepted in a particular country.

Literature review

Hard sell and soft sell appeals

Advertising literature often differentiates between two approaches to advertising (soft-sell and hard-sell) which provide very distinct ways of communicating with audiences (see Beard, 2004; Haygood, 2016). Hard-sell 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, p. 1). The most complete academic definition of hard and soft-sell appeals is offered by Okazaki et al. (2010a, 2010b); it characterizes hard-sell as a direct, explicit, rational, information-based approach that encourages a quick sale, and soft-sell as using indirect, image-based, emotional appeals. This type of definition, which primarily characterizes hard sell and soft sell appeals as visually based, is used by most researchers, and as a result, all studies of hard sell and soft sell appeals only test image and word-based advertisements, and

never consider the vocal characteristics of these appeals (Akbari, 2015; Butt et al., 2017; Okazaki et al., 2010a; 2013). Even Okazaki et al. (2010b) otherwise comprehensive 15-item method for measuring soft-sell and hard-sell appeals does not incorporate voice as contributing to the hard and soft-sell appeals. Thus, research into hard sell and soft sell appeals has been "deaf." We argue that the research noted above is too narrow and that it is important to bring the contribution of voice into academic research of these appeals.

Hard sell and soft sell vocal styles

The lack of scholarly work acknowledging the contribution of voice in hard sell and soft sell appeals is compensated by discussions and descriptions of these vocal styles by voice acting professionals. Although these professionals agree that there exists an infinite variation in voices, they typically identify hard sell and soft sell as the two main delivery styles, although some identify three styles: "Hard-sell (fast and punchy), Medium-sell (mellow), soft-sell (relaxed)" (Alburger, 1999, p. 30). What constitutes the hard sell or the soft sell vocal delivery style has been debated by these voice acting professionals and they concur that a hard sell voice is a fast, loud, high to mid pitch, upbeat voice conveying energy and enthusiasm (Baker, 2014; Expertvillage, 2008a; Terzza, 2018) whereas a soft sell voice is a slow, soft, low to mid pitch voice conveying warmth and "allure" (Expertvillage, 2008b). The distinction between hard sell and soft sell vocal styles therefore seems to revolve around three main elements: speed, loudness, and pitch.

Cross cultural research of hard sell and soft sell appeals

While there has been cross cultural research on consumers' perception of hard-sell and soft-sell appeals, it has been extremely scant and has not considered the contribution of voice to these appeals. This small body of research has nevertheless shown that hard-sell and soft-sell appeals are used varyingly across cultures, and with different levels of effectiveness (Albers-Miller & Royne Stafford, 1999; Dianoux et al., 2014; Lin, 2001; Mueller, 1987, 1992). For example, some research on print advertisements shows a relatively homogenous acceptance of hard-sell appeals across specific markets, such as the USA and Japan (Okazaki et al., 2010a), while other studies tend to show that soft-sell is more effective than hard-sell as part of global consumer culture positioning (GCCP) strategies because it generates less irritation and more favorable impressions (Alden et al., 1999; Amine et al., 2005; Okazaki et al., 2013). Other research using GCCP however, Butt et al. (2017) tends to go against this, showing that, in a developing market, such as Pakistan, hard-sell ads can be perceived as more believable. The important point to note for us is that none of these cross-cultural studies mention the contribution of voice to these appeals.

Cross cultural research of advertising voices

Cross cultural research of advertising voices mostly consists of a small body of research that simply focuses on tallying the number of male and female voice overs in television commercials, often as part of larger quantitative content analyses of advertising messages from different countries (Furnham & Chan, 2003; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Furnham & Paltzer, 2010; Kim & Lowry, 2005; Matthes et al., 2016). Surprisingly, in-depth qualitative cross-cultural studies of advertising vocal styles are nonexistent. Despite early arguments that voice has a "social quality" and that people in society "imitate each other's voices to a not inconsiderable extent" (Sapir, 1927, p. 895) and despite findings in psychology suggesting 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 et al., 2001; Waarama, 2015; Waaramaa et al., 2021; Waarama & Leisiö, 2013), cross cultural advertising research has failed to consider the social and cultural formatting of advertising voices in different country environments and to qualitatively explore consumers' attitude toward these voices. Only a few studies have used a qualitative cross-cultural framework for the study of voice quality, but they are

extremely rare and based on analysis of commercials (Pennock-Speck & Millagros del Saz Rubio, 2009), not on audience research. So far, one cross cultural study (Desmarais, 2000), has researched the culturally formatted characteristics of advertising voices and provided insight into advertising professionals' cultural production logic of these voices. As Desmarais (2000) argued, advertising voices can be viewed as sociocultural constructions relayed to us by advertising; they are vocal incarnations of certain social and psychological attributes that advertising professionals from specific countries favor, select, and consider to be representative of competent authorities for consumers. At the level of the nation, as Desmarais (2000, p. 137) noted, "vocal formations"—specific vocal styles or symbolic vocal constructions within the advertising discourse—are shaped by years of practice and institutionalized by the industry and the mass media that uses them. In the end, through the repetition of a certain pattern of vocal communication in the advertising discourse, voice-overs encode a cultural distinction and become part of a taken-for-granted everyday cultural environment to which the national audience becomes familiar and accustomed.

Familiarity

The notion of familiarity, and more particularly cultural familiarity, is therefore a central element of our cross-cultural research. We wish to investigate whether consumers' familiarity with an advertising vocal style, induced by the repetition of that specific vocal style in these consumers' country environment, is associated with their attitude (liking or disliking) toward an advertising message.

Our study therefore draws on what is known as the Exposure-Affect Relationship (Bornstein, 1989) or Mere Exposure Effect (MEE) (Zajonc, 1968) which is based on the idea that people tend to like something more as a result of having been repeatedly exposed to it, in other words that familiarity leads to liking. This phenomenon has been shown in relation to, for instance, brand choice (Baker, 1999) or object preference (Tom et al., 2007). Studies specifically dealing with our focus—aural stimuli—have demonstrated mere exposure effects with sounds (Bornstein, 1989) or with musical stimuli, such as tunes or melodies (Green et al., 2012; Halpern & Müllensiefen, 2008; Heingartner & Hall, 1974; Mungan et al., 2019; Peretz et al., 1998) and showed that music heard most often was most liked, suggesting that music appreciation relies on memory processes. Research has even found that viewers' voting for Eurovision song contest were more likely to vote for a contestant to whom they had been previously exposed (Verrier, 2012).

In advertising, some studies show that prior familiarity with an ad leads to more positive evaluations (Fang et al., 2007), enhancing its likeability and reducing boredom (Mano, 1996), and influencing brand preference (Yoo, 2008). Other studies, however, have shown that the exposure-affect relationship does not last in advertising because increased repetition of an advertisement leads to consumer inattention, disinterest, negative thoughts and therefore lowers ad effectiveness (Calder & Sternthal, 1980; Greenberg & Suttoni, 1973; Nordhielm, 2002). This wear out phenomenon occurs despite "flight" strategies designed to enhance attention (Calder & Sternthal, 1980). Thus far, there has not been any research testing consumers' attitude toward specific vocal advertising styles against consumers' familiarity (due to repeated exposure) with these in their cultural environment. Our study fills this gap, it contends that consumers are cultural beings whose attitude toward vocal styles may be influenced by the repetition of, and therefore familiarity with, specific "vocal formations" (Desmarais, 2000, p. 137) circulating in their advertising cultural environment. In other words, in testing familiarity, our study investigates whether the established advertising vocal environment within which consumers "exist" works as a priming environment (Yoo, 2008), influencing their preference for specific types of voices. Therefore, in a similar way as Hekkert et al. (2013), we did not experimentally manipulate Mere Exposure, rather, participants' exposure phase was their prior immersion in, and hence familiarity with, the advertising vocal environment of their country.

The context

To be able to test the relationship between familiarity and liking for a vocal style, we needed to choose participants from two contrasting country environments, one in which soft sell dominates and in which consumers have been repeatedly exposed to this style (thus having become familiar with it), and another country in which hard sell dominates. France and New Zealand were selected as they provided contrasting advertising landscapes in terms of vocal styles, one (France) being significantly more soft sell oriented than the other (New Zealand).

France is considered a high or high medium context culture (Biswas et al., 1992; Hall & Hall, 1990; Kittler et al., 2011; Laroche et al., 2014) relying on indirect, implicit communication and on developing complex fields of connotations. Research in the advertising field has shown that French advertising professionals also have a strong reluctance to use a direct communicative approach; they prefer not to remind consumers about "the act of commerce" and as a result avoid pushing explicit elements, such as price, resulting in French advertising being strong on politeness, empathy, and respect (Desmarais, 2000, 2004; Whitelock & Rey, 1998; Zandpour et al., 1992). The French indirect advertising approach is embodied in emotional messages using humor, love, or sex appeals (Appelbaum & Halliburton, 1993; Biswas et al., 1992) and characterized by a heavy reliance on the use of seduction, to the point that advertising and seduction are almost fused (Desmarais, 2003; Taylor et al., 1996). This reliance on seduction is illustrated in the frequent use of esthetically pleasing messages and of feminine soft signs, such as female seductive characters, and a heavy reliance on soft female voice-overs (Desmarais, 2003; Matthes et al., 2016). In summary, "soft-sell outsells hard-sell in France" (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 11). French consumers are by and large exposed to, and thus familiar with, a high context, soft-sell environment.

In contrast, New Zealand is considered as a low context culture privileging a more direct, explicit form of communication. Research on New Zealand advertising (Andrews et al., 1991; Desmarais, 2003; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Lysonski & Pollay, 1990; Michelle, 2012), shows it privileges a more immediate, direct, and authoritative communication approach which is embodied in many explicit unambiguous messages and in the overwhelming frequency of male characters and male voice-overs (Desmarais, 2000, 2003, 2004). New Zealand consumers are by and large exposed to, and familiar with, a low context, hard-sell environment. France and New Zealand therefore provide ideal contrasting advertising environments for a cross cultural study wishing to assess consumers' attitude against their familiarity toward hard-sell and soft-sell vocal styles.

France and New Zealand were also selected because they provide interesting contrasting environments in relation to Hofstede et al. (2010) cultural dimensions (power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, indulgence). These cultural dimensions provide an interesting overview of the cultural differences between countries; however, not all of them can usefully be related to our study of consumers' perception of advertising soft sell and hard sell voices.

One of the dimensions 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 looks at the extent to which a culture supports a traditional view of masculine traits (such as assertiveness, competitiveness, admiration of the strong) or feminine traits (such as nurture, friendliness, and being in touch with one's own feelings) (Hofstede et al., 2010). With a score of 43 on the masculine index, France has a somewhat feminine culture compared to New Zealand which, with a score of 58, qualifies as a masculine country (Hofstede Insights, 2023). In line with Hofstede's cultural depictions, it is therefore possible that people from a somewhat feminine country, such as France, may perceive slow, soft, and warm soft sell voices, especially female, more favorably than hard sell voices. In contrast, it is possible that people from a masculine country, such as New Zealand, may perceive loud, fast, upbeat, commanding, hard sell voices more favorably as these project power, competitiveness, and assertiveness.

Another cultural dimension that could play a role in consumers' assessment of our hard sell and soft sell voices is that of power distance. Power distance is the extent to which a community accepts and endorses authority, inequality, power, and status differences (Hofstede et al., 2010). Hofstede insights show that France rates much higher than New Zealand in terms of power distance (68 *vs.* 22) (Hofstede Insights, 2023). Therefore, if New Zealanders are not used to, and do not like, authority, inequality, power, and status differences, they might also not like "top down," commanding hard sell voices that project authority, power, and possibly inequality; instead, they might prefer soft sell voices that convey cordiality, warmth, and intimacy. On the other hand, people from a country that scores high on power distance, such as the French, might not be shocked by, and might even prefer, commanding, powerful hard sell voices projecting less intimacy but more power, distance, impersonality, and coldness than soft sell voices.

In sum, Hofstede's dimensions provide an interesting tool to postulate how respondents from a country might react to hard and soft sell voices. However, the discussion above leads to two contradictory postulations, (1) that French people (as part of a somewhat feminine country) might prefer soft sell voices and (2) that, as part of a high power-distance country, they might prefer hard sell commanding voices. The opposite postulations can be made for New Zealand. Therefore, although Hofstede's dimensions are interesting to consider, predicting how respondents from each country might react to soft sell or hard sell voices based on differences in masculinity or high power-distance in these countries is problematic.

Research questions

This study's main purpose is to explore whether the vocal preferences of consumers differ or are similar *across* countries. However, we also consider that cross cultural analysis does not simply consist in comparing country environments; it should also involve probing deeper into the unique characteristics of each of the countries being compared. For that reason, we also explored whether the vocal preferences of consumers differed *within* each country. In the end, looking at consumers' preferences across and within countries helped us develop a better understanding of vocal preferences and generated a deeper discussion of results. The specific research questions posed in our study were:

Table 1. Research questions.

Difference within countries	Attitude (liking)	RQ1: Does consumers' attitude (liking or disliking) toward the hard-sell and soft-sell vocal styles (MHS, FHS, MSS, FSS; HSMF, SSMF) differ within countries?
	Familiarity	RQ2: Does consumers' familiarity toward the hard-sell and soft-sell vocal styles (MHF, FHS, MSS, FSS; HSMF, SSMF) differ within countries?
Difference across countries	Attitude (liking)	RQ3: Does consumers' attitude (liking or disliking) toward the hard-sell and soft-sell vocal styles (MHS, FHS, MSS, FSS; HSMF, SSMF) differ across countries?
	Familiarity	RQ4: Does consumers' familiarity toward the hard-sell and soft-sell vocal styles (MHF, FHS, MSS, FSS; HSMF, SSMF) differ across countries?
RQ5: Is there a relationship between consumers' familiarity with a vocal style (MHF, FHS, MSS, FSS; HSMF, SSMF) and their attitude (liking or disliking) toward it?		

MHS: male hard-sell; FHS: female hard-sell; MSS: male soft-sell; FSS: female soft-sell; HSMF: hard sell male and female combined; SSMF: soft sell male and female combined.

Methods

Our study answered these questions by exploring consumers' reactions to four advertising voices [one male hard sell (MHS), one female hard-sell (FHS), one male soft sell (MSS), and one female soft-sell (FSS)] *via* an online questionnaire administered on the Qualtrics platform in New Zealand and in France.

Recording the four voices

The male and female hard-sell voices were recorded in New Zealand by professional voice artists who all had extensive experience recording advertising messages for prominent radio and television channels. Because of the dearth of research and the absence of definition for hard-sell or soft-sell vocal styles in academia, we relied on the advice and definitions from our professional voice artists and other professionals in New Zealand and France (Baker, 2014; Expertvillage, 2008a, 2008b) for the production of

the recordings. For the hard sell, in line with professionals' definitions (Baker, 2014; Expertvillage, 2008a; Terzza, 2018), we briefed our voice artists to produce a fast, loud, high to mid pitch, upbeat voice conveying energy and enthusiasm. Ultimately, the hard-sell voices produced were similar to the loud and fast hard-sell approach common in New Zealand. The female hard-sell message was 15 s long (224 wpm) with an average pitch of 394 Hz and average volume of 85 dB, and the male hard-sell message was 16 s long (210 wpm) with an average pitch of 268 Hz and average volume of 84 dB.

The male and female soft-sell voices were recorded in France by professional bilingual English/French voice artists who all had extensive experience recording advertising messages for prominent radio and television channels in France. For the soft sell, in line with definitions of other professionals (Expertvillage, 2008b), we briefed our voice artists to produce a slow, soft, low to mid pitch voice conveying warmth and "allure." Ultimately, the soft-sell voices produced were similar to the softer and slower soft-sell style common in France and were approximately twice as slow as the hard-sell messages. The female soft-sell message was 30 s long (112 wpm) with an average pitch of 181 Hz and an average volume of 76 dB, and the male soft-sell message was 27 s long (124 wpm) with an average pitch of 150 Hz and an average volume of 76 dB. 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 (Figures 1 and 2).

The message

In this study, we tested "single-voice copy" defined by Alburger (1999, p. 31) as a message delivered in its entirety by a solo performer. With input from our voice professionals, we designed a neutral advertising message that could be adapted to both hard-sell and soft-sell vocal styles. Since we were concerned about assessing people's reactions to broad hard and soft-sell vocal styles and since it is under low involvement that listeners better evaluate voice cues conditions (Gelinas-Chebat & Chebat, 1992), the message was designed to be neutral, low involvement, and non-product-specific so respondents would first and foremost focus on the voice characteristics of the advertising message and would not be influenced by elements that can affect processing of the message, such as product type, product involvement, and country of origin. This message design was especially important 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 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 also specifically asked to focus on how the message was delivered, not on what was being said. The message is found below:

> 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.

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 years. Respondents' gender was evenly split with 51% female and 49% male across both countries, with 70 females and 54 males in France, and 89 females and 99 males in New Zealand (Table 1).

Survey instrument

The research was completed online *via* a questionnaire administered in university computer laboratories. 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. The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions to obtain a more precise assessment of respondents' attitude toward the vocal styles. For each voice they listened to, respondents were asked to complete the following tasks:

a. Quantitatively rate their attitude (liking-disliking) toward the four advertising voices they listened to, using a seven-point Osgood semantic differential scale (love-hate) (e.g., Chattopadhyay et al., 2003).
b. Qualitatively explain, using their own words, why they liked or did not like each voice. These open-ended questions were designed to increase the reliability of the quantitative results obtained from a). They gave respondents the opportunity to expand on their previous scale assessment and allowed us to provide a finer analysis of respondents' attitude toward these voices. This helped us qualitatively assess the levels of liking or irritation toward each vocal styles, or "the degree to which an advertisement is viewed by an individual as disturbing or annoying" (Okazaki et al., 2013, p. 264).
c. Quantitatively rate on a seven-point Osgood semantic differential scale (familiar-unfamiliar) how familiar they are to each vocal style. This item specifically probes into respondents' repeated exposure to a stimulus which is the core of the exposure-affect relationship.

Analysis

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 that distinguish soft sell from hard sell vocal delivery styles (fast-slow, shouting-whispering, excited-calm) on a semantic differential seven-point scale. Table 2 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 (Alburger, 1999; Baker, 2014; Expertvillage, 2008a, 2008b; Terzza, 2018).

Table 2. Respondents' rating of each voice's characteristics.

		Fast *vs.* slow	Shouting *vs.* whispering	Excited *vs.* calm
MHS	Mean	1.97	2.23	1.98
	SD	0.94	1.04	1.09
	t-Test	−38.213***	−30.14***	−32.84***
FHS	Mean	1.43	1.96	1.43
	SD	0.61	0.89	0.64
	t-Test	−74.23***	−40.72***	−71.04***
MSS	Mean	5.77	5.39	5.98
	SD	1.16	1.08	1.12
	t-Test	27.1***	22.83***	31.49***
FSS	Mean	6.28	6.27	6.42
	SD	0.78	0.83	1.01
	t-Test	51.83***	48.85***	42.75***

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

Quantitative analysis

Analysis across countries. Quantitative analysis involved three tests. Firstly, to determine whether there were significant differences *across* countries between respondents' liking of, and familiarity with, each of the voices (MHS, FHS, MSS, FSS) we used a two-way ANOVA. Secondly, we tested the exposure-affect relationship by statistically linking respondents' liking of each voice with their familiarity with it. This was done by conducting an SEM analysis to examine the significance of relationship between the independent variable (familiarity) and the dependent variable (liking) for each country. The model illustrating the relationship between these variables is found below.

To obtain a broader understanding of respondents' assessment of hard sell and soft sell styles, we also measured respondents' attitude (liking) and familiarity toward the gender-combined hard sell vocal style (called HSMF) and gender-combined soft sell vocal style (called SSMF). In a similar way as for the four voices, we used a two-way ANOVA to determine whether there were significant differences between respondents' liking of

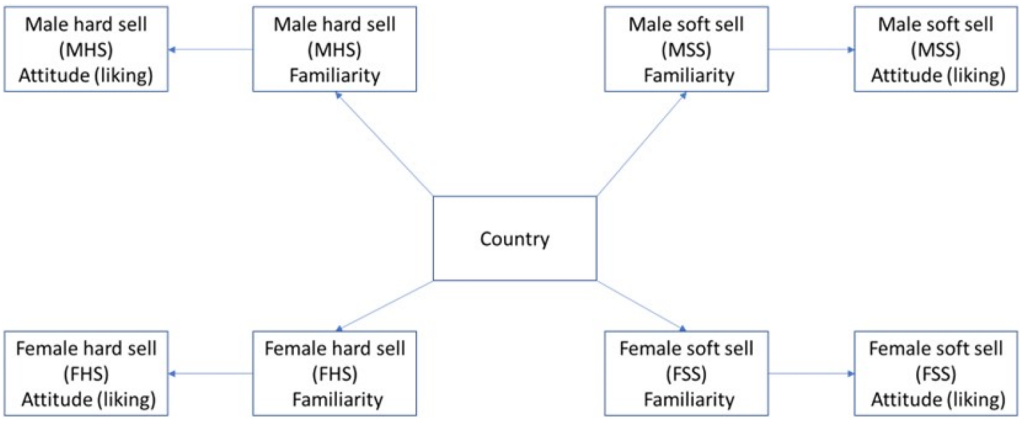

Figure 1. Model illustrating the relationship between variables (vocal styles gender separated).

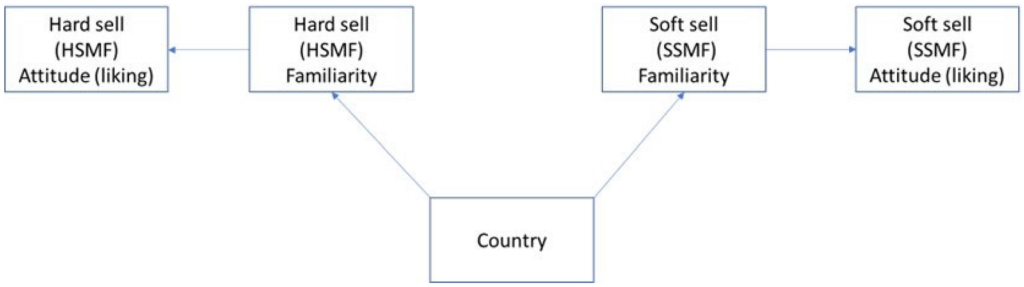

Figure 2. Model illustrating the relationship between variables (vocal styles gender combined).

and familiarity with, the "overall hard-sell vocal style" (HSMF) *vs.* the "overall soft-sell vocal style" (SSMF) across countries. The model illustrating the relationship between these variables is found below.

Analysis within countries. To understand whether there was a significant difference in attitude and familiarity between each voice and between the gender combined hard sell vocal style (called HSMF) and gender combined soft sell vocal style (called SSMF) *within* each country, we conducted Paired *t*-tests.

Qualitative analysis

Quantitative analysis was complemented and enhanced by a two-phase qualitative analysis of respondents' justifications for liking or disliking each voice. First, a preliminary exploration of respondents' answers was carried out. Following other studies (Andrews et al., 1991; Chattopadhyay et al., 2003), respondents' comments were classified into broad categories that emerged from the data: (1) Positive: comments that described the vocal style positively, (2) Negative: comments that described it negatively, (3) Neutral: comments that contained equally positive and negative descriptions. Disagreements between coders were resolved by discussion. This process of classifying answers helped gauge the overall attitude of respondents toward each of the vocal styles, allowing us to understand the prominence of various thoughts and feelings that each vocal style may elicit in each culture. Secondly, a more detailed exploration of respondents' comments was done using Nvivo software to help uncover the main words and concepts contained within the responses (in terms of frequency) as well as to give broad information about how these may be related (co-occurrence). To complement the too literal interpretation of the software, the authors conducted a more detailed coding process which involved independently examining each answer for particular cultural expressions that may add to the cultural interpretation of each vocal style.

Results

The results section is organized into three main parts. First, we present the quantitative results about consumers' attitude (liking) toward each vocal style (MHS, FHS, MSS, FSS, HSMF, SSMF) and complement these results with qualitative findings. Second, we present the quantitative results about consumers' familiarity with each vocal style. Finally, we assess the exposure-affect relationship for each voice to find out whether there is a relationship between consumers' familiarity with a vocal style (MHS, FHS, MSS, FSS, HSMF, SSMF) and their attitude (liking or disliking) toward it.

Attitude toward the voices

In this section, we present the difference in attitude toward the voices within each country and across countries. Table 3 presents the means calculations for each voice within each country as well as the results of the two-way ANOVA, indicating differences in attitude toward the four voices across countries. Table 3 also includes results for the gender combined hard sell and soft sell vocal styles (HSMF and SSMF), including paired *t*-tests for the within-country analyses.

RQ1: Does consumers' attitude toward the hard-sell and soft-sell voices differ within countries?

In New Zealand, the most liked voice was the Male Hard Sell ($M_{New\ Zealand\ MHS} = 3.93$, $SD = 1.53$) followed closely by the Female Soft Sell voice (FSS) (see Table 3). The most disliked voice was Female Hard Sell ($M_{New\ Zealand\ FHS} = 3.34$, $SD = 1.67$). Interestingly, results with gender combined for New Zealand show no significant difference between HSMF ($M_{New\ Zealand\ HSMF} = 3.63$, $SD = 1.63$) and SSMF ($M_{New\ Zealand\ SSMF} = 3.67$, $SD = 1.52$); $t(188) = -0.30$, $p = .807$ suggesting that New Zealand respondents, unlike the French, did not have a clear preference for either the hard-sell or the soft-sell vocal style.

In France, the most liked voice was Female Soft Sell ($M_{France\ FSS} = 4.81$, $SD = 1.44$) followed closely by the Male Soft Sell voice (MSS) (see Table 3). The most disliked voice was Female Hard Sell ($M_{France\ FHS} = 2.24$, $SD = 1.38$). The French had a significant preference for soft sell voices over hard sell ones. This preference for the soft-sell vocal style over the hard-sell style is confirmed by the paired *t*-test showing a significant difference in the attitude (liking) scores between HSMF ($M_{France\ HSMF} = 2.67$, $SD = 1.52$) and SSMF ($M_{France\ SSMF} = 4.77$, $SD = 1.40$); $t(124) = -15.61$, $p < 0.01$ (see Table 3).

Table 3. Results of two-way ANOVA where group variable is attitude (liking) toward the vocal style and category variable is country.

Gender separated	MHS	FHS	MSS	FSS	Mean difference	*t*-Stat
New Zealand						
Mean	3.93	3.34	3.58	3.76		
Standard deviation	1.53	1.67	1.53	1.50		
Percentage of response over 4 (scale of 1–7)	39.89%	26.60%	30.32%	34.57%		
France						
Mean	3.11	2.24	4.73	4.81		
Standard deviation	1.53	1.38	1.35	1.44		
Percentage of response over 4 (scale of 1–7)	22.59%	8.87%	61.30%	66.94%		
Mean difference	0.82***	1.1***	−1.15***	−1.05***		
F test	21.78	36.68	46.46	38.24		
Df	1310	1310	1310	1310		
Gender combined	**HSMF hard sell**		**SSMF soft sell**			
New Zealand						
Mean	3.63		3.67		−0.035	−0.30
Standard deviation	1.63		1.52			
Percentage of response over 4 (scale of 1–7)	33.24%		32.45%			
France						
Mean	2.67		4.77		−2.10***	−15.61
Standard deviation	1.52		1.40			
Percentage of response over 4 (scale of 1–7)	15.73%		64.11%			
Mean difference	0.96***		−1.106***			
F test	54.87		84.52			
Df	1623		1623			

***$p < 0.01$.

Table 4. Mean difference between each voice within each country: attitude (liking).

			MHS		FHS		MSS	
			France	NZ	France	NZ	France	NZ
			Second most disliked	Most liked	Most disliked	Most disliked	Second most liked	Second most disliked
FHS	France	Most disliked	−0.870 −4.702 $p=.1471$					
	NZ	Most disliked		−0.590 −3.572***				
MSS	France	Second most liked	1.620 8.841***		2.490 14.363***			
	NZ	Second most disliked		−0.350 −2.218**		0.240 1.453 $p=.1471$		
FSS	France	Most liked	1.700 9.010***		2.570 14.349***		0.080 0.451 $p=.6522$	
	NZ	Second most liked		−0.170 −1.088 $p=.2774$		0.420 2.565**		0.180 1.152 $p=.2501$

**$p<0.05$, ***$p<0.01$.
The top figure in each cell is the mean difference, the second figure is the *t*-statistic, and the third one is the *p*-value.

The paired *t*-tests conducted between MHS, FHS, MSS, and FSS reported in Table 4 below, gave a more precise indication about the differences in attitude (liking) toward the various voices within countries. These statistics confirm that the French clearly prefer the soft sell style. They had a significant preference for FSS (most liked voice) and MSS (second most liked voice) over MHS (second most disliked voice) and FHS (most disliked voice). For New Zealand, the statistics confirm that New Zealanders did not have a clear preference for either the hard-sell or the soft-sell vocal style. They had a significant preference for MHS (most liked voice) over FHS (most disliked voice) and over MSS (second most disliked voice). They also had a significant preference for FSS (second most liked voice) over FHS (most disliked).

RQ3: Does consumers' attitude toward the hard-sell and soft-sell voices differ across countries?

We now present the difference in attitude across countries toward the four voices (MHS, FHS, MSS, FSS), reporting quantitative results and supplementing these with qualitative data. We present results for HSMF and SSMF at the end of the section.

Attitude toward the male hard sell voice (MHS)

The two-way ANOVA test (see Table 3) revealed a statistically significant difference in attitude (liking) for the male hard sell voice between New Zealand and France, $F(1,310)=21.78$, $p<0.01$. French respondents did not like MHS whereas New Zealanders had a significantly more positive attitude (liking) toward it.

While quantitative results gave a good indication of the cultural difference between New Zealand and French respondents' liking of MHS, qualitative analysis of respondents' open comments shed more light on their attitudes toward it. The first step in the qualitative analysis of respondents' comments—their categorization into positive, neutral, and negative—revealed important differences across countries and supported the quantitative findings above. French respondents' attitude toward MHS was very negative. The majority of comments were negative ($N=83$; 66.93%), with only 23 French respondents (18.54%) commenting positively about this voice and 18 comments fitting in the neutral category (14.51%). In line with the quantitative findings, New Zealand respondents' attitude about MHS was more balanced, with comments nearly equally spread between positive ($N=73$; 38.82%) and negative ($N=66$; 35.10%), and 49 remaining comments (26.06%) in the neutral category. Thus, respondents' qualitative comments support the quantitative findings reported in Table 3 and confirm that French respondents had a high level of irritation for MHS and a much more negative attitude toward it than New Zealanders.

While the categorization of comments into positive, neutral, and negative confirmed the more negative attitude of French respondents toward MHS, a more in-depth analysis of respondents' comments also revealed similarities and differences as to why respondents from both countries liked or disliked it.

French respondents expressed their irritation toward MHS far more than New Zealanders, using a wider range of arguments. While a minority of French respondents liked MHS for its dynamism, for its motivating rhythm that captured their attention, and for its powerfulness that made it sound "sure of itself," the majority found its speed, loudness, and aggressive stance particularly "stressful," "unpleasant," and "tiring to listen to." The most common comments were that MHS was "too fast," "too loud," "too aggressive," "pushy," "in your face," "intense," "forceful," "intrusive," with several French respondents going as far as saying that it sounded like "an army sergeant," that it was "unbearable" and "made you want to flee." As one French respondent put it:

> Too fast, no humor, too direct. We are not robots, we are potential clients and we want to be seduced or convinced, which is not at all the case here.

For French respondents, the male hard-sell voice was also not considered trustworthy and credible because it was "too focused on selling directly;" it was considered "too promotional" and sounded too "desperate to sell." Interestingly, French respondents also recurrently associated MHS with "arrogance." For them, this was the voice of someone who is "too sure of himself which makes you lose trust in him." Therefore, MHS made French respondents suspicious, with several respondents noting that it reminded them of a "charlatan's voice." In their opinion, this was a deceitful sounding delivery style that would undermine the credibility and quality of a brand, and which they associated with "low end products." Overall, French respondents found MHS irritating, annoying, unpleasant, leading to perceptions of it being insincere and not trustworthy.

A noted above, New Zealanders' attitude toward MHS was more balanced, with comments nearly equally spread between positive and negative. Some New Zealanders, commented negatively on MHS using similar descriptions as French respondents, noting that it was "too fast," "too loud," "aggressive," "pushy," "intense," and "forceful;" however, they also commented positively on MHS much more than the French. New Zealand respondents' most recurrent positive comments were that MHS attracted attention well by creating a good level of excitement and that it was an easy, attractive, engaging voice to listen to and understand. They enjoyed its fast pace, enthusiasm, clarity, and assertiveness, and noted how these elements also kept them interested and made the message memorable. In addition, in contrast to the French, New Zealand respondents considered that, with its "nice and firm" tone, the male hard-sell voice sounded professional, confident, and thus competent and convincing.

Overall then, our analysis shows that, while MHS engenders similar negative and positive types of feelings across countries (being liked for its enthusiasm but disliked for its fast, loud, aggressive, pushy style), it confirms that the proportion of respondents liking or disliking it and the intensity of their feelings varies considerably according to countries. In this case, New Zealand respondents had a rather neutral attitude toward MHS, but a more positive attitude than the French who exhibited much more irritation toward it.

Attitude toward the female hard-sell voice (FHS)

The two-way ANOVA test (see Table 3) revealed a statistically significant difference in means for this voice between New Zealand and France, $F(1,310) = 36.68$, $p < 0.01$. In a similar way as for MHS, French respondents strongly disliked FHS whereas New Zealanders had a significantly more positive attitude (liking) toward it.

French respondents' comments about FHS were overwhelmingly negative ($N = 103$; 86.06%), with only eight respondents (6.45%) commenting positively about it and 13 respondents' comments (10.48%) in the neutral category. In contrast, New Zealand respondents' comments about FHS, while also mostly negative, were much more balanced, with 53.19% of negative comments ($N = 100$) and the remaining comments equally spread between positive ($N = 43$; 22.87%) and neutral comments ($N = 45$; 23.93%). This spread of respondents'

comments confirmed the quantitative findings reported in Table 3: respondents from both countries held a negative attitude toward FHS but many more French respondents had a negative attitude toward it than New Zealanders.

The more in-depth analysis of respondents' comments also revealed similarities and differences as to why respondents from both countries liked or disliked FHS. Overall New Zealand and French respondents' comments—positive and negative—about FHS were very similar to those made about MHS. French and New Zealand respondents similarly noted that FHS was "too fast," "too loud," "too excited," "too aggressive," and "intense." It was considered too "in your face," "pushy," "annoying," "off putting," and "intrusive," with some respondents going as far as to say it inhibited their purchase intentions:

> I can't stand pushy people. It puts me of making purchases, in a big way. (NZ)

> I don't find it pleasant, it would not make me want to buy. (France)

Respondents from both countries also found the vocal style's "intensity," "pushiness," and "overexcitement," suspicious, leading to perceptions of it lacking sincerity and trustworthiness:

> Her voice is overpowering and confrontational. The voice gives the suggestion that they are trying to rip you off. (NZ)

> Too powerful, annoying and does not sound trustworthy. (France)

The French respondents, who commented negatively on FHS much more than New Zealanders, also expressed their irritation with more intensity than New Zealanders. While a very small number of French respondents ($N = 8$; 6.45%) liked FHS for its "dynamism," "energy," and its "fresh" and "upbeat" tone which they thought would fit with promotional messages, the vast majority found it "too fast," "too loud," "too aggressive," making it "stressful," "unpleasant," "tiring," and for some, "unbearable" to listen to. French respondents noted how FHS made them "feel verbally assaulted," that it felt like having "a gun on your temple," that it was "oppressive," "impolite," and "lacking respect for the audience," all signs of advertising irritation. In a similar way as MHS, FHS was also not considered trustworthy or credible because it was perceived as being too focused on selling directly. In French respondents' view, such distrustful voice would undermine the credibility and quality of a brand that they repeatedly associated with low end products and a culturally foreign way of communicating:

> Cheap, shouting, too commercial.

> Too aggressive, shouty, oppressing. It gives a very cheap image to the product it sells. It also has a very American intonation 'under LSD', very tiring!

FHS nevertheless attracted positive comments, albeit very few, and primarily from New Zealand respondents. New Zealand respondents' most recurrent comments were that FHS captured attention well and provided the listener with excitement through its enthusiasm. They enjoyed its fast pace and directness, the mix of energy and authority it conveyed, and also, in contrast to French respondents, some found it appealing and even pleasant to listen to because it sounded "to the point" and also reflected a "happy," "friendly," and "bubbly" personality.

Overall then, our analysis shows that, while FHS engenders comparable negative or positive feelings across countries, it also confirms that the proportion of respondents liking or disliking it and the intensity of their feelings varies greatly according to countries. In this case, New Zealand respondents had a more positive attitude toward FHS than French respondents who exhibited more (and more intense) irritation toward it.

Attitude toward the male soft-sell voice (MSS)

The two-way ANOVA test (see Table 3) revealed a statistically significant difference in means for the male soft sell voice between New Zealand and France, $F(1,310) = 46.46$, $p < 0.01$. French respondents liked this voice whereas New Zealanders had a significantly less favorable attitude toward it.

French respondents' comments about MSS were mostly positive ($N = 67$; 54.03%). Only 23 respondents (18.54%) commented negatively about it and 34 comments were classified as neutral (27.41%). In contrast, New Zealand respondents' comments about MSS were mostly negative

($N = 91$; 48.40%), with an equal number of neutral ($n = 48$; 25.53%) and positive comments ($N = 49$; 26.06%). Thus, this distribution of comments reinforces the quantitative findings reported in Table 3 by revealing that French respondents had a more positive attitude toward MSS than New Zealanders.

The more in-depth analysis of respondents' comments also revealed similarities and differences as to why respondents from both countries liked or disliked MSS. French respondents' most recurrent comments were that MSS was "easy" and "pleasant to listen" to, that it "showed respect" to the listener by not being aggressive, therefore making them want to listen to the message. They found the male soft-sell's "calm," "collected," and "appeasing" stance, attractive and attention grabbing. They enjoyed its "warmth" and its "soft and "relaxing" tone which made it "reassuring" and "inspired confidence" and "trust," as in such comments:

> Easy to understand voice, warm, attractive. Sounds trustworthy and makes you want to listen.

> Calm and professional sounding voice which makes you want to trust it.

In contrast to French respondents, most New Zealanders, who expressed their dislike of MSS more than the French, found its "slowness," "softness," "monotone," and "lack of enthusiasm" "boring," "uninspiring," and "annoying." New Zealanders' common perception was that the voice was "dragging on for longer than necessary" and that this gave it a "low impact," not attracting their attention, with several respondents going as far as saying that it would "put you to sleep." Interestingly, MSS was also considered by many New Zealand respondents as "creepy," as well as "a little scary," characteristics that made listeners feel uncomfortable and made them believe that it was "insincere," "shifty," and "not trustworthy:"

> I don't like this voice at all. It is boring, creepy, too slow and dragged out – not effective to grab someone's attention and make a sale at all.

> I really do not like this voice. It's slow, it doesn't grab my attention and it's hard to listen to because you get bored. Also the level of seductiveness in his voice makes him come across creepy and therefore would not be perceived as trustworthy.

MSS nevertheless generated some positive comments from New Zealanders; for example some liked MSS for the fact that it was "easy to listen to," they liked it for its unobtrusiveness, for its "calming," "relaxing," "soothing" slow pace and "soft," "deep" tone. Therefore, despite a majority of negative comments, such positive remarks, together with a rating close to average for liking, suggest some potential for this vocal style in New Zealand.

Overall then, our analysis shows that, while MSS engendered comparable negative or positive feelings across cultures, it confirms that the proportion of respondents liking or disliking it and the intensity of their feelings varies greatly according to countries. In this case, French respondents had a much more positive attitude toward the male soft-sell style than New Zealanders who exhibited more irritation toward it.

Attitude toward the female soft-sell voice (FSS)

The two-way ANOVA test (see Table 3) revealed a statistically significant difference in means for the female soft sell voice between New Zealand and France, $F(1,310) = 38.24$, $p < 0.01$. Thus, in a similar way as for MSS, results for that voice revealed that French respondents strongly liked FSS whereas New Zealanders had a significantly more negative (although moderate) attitude (liking) toward it.

In line with the quantitative findings above, French respondents' comments about FSS were mostly positive ($N = 72$; 58.06%), with 27 respondents' comments in the neutral category (21.77%) and 25 respondents (20.16%) commenting negatively about it. In contrast, New Zealand respondents' comments about FSS were mostly negative ($N = 75$; 39.89%) and more balanced, with 64 neutral comments (34.04%) and 49 positive comments (26.06%). This distribution of comments supports the quantitative findings reported in Table 3, which reveals French respondents' more positive attitude toward FSS than New Zealanders. It also reveals New Zealanders' mixed feelings toward it.

In-depth analysis of respondents' comments also revealed similarities and differences as to why respondents from both countries liked or disliked FSS. New Zealand and French respondents' comments—positive and negative—about FSS were very similar to those made about MSS. Overall, New Zealanders often described FSS as "too slow," "too quiet," "too soft," and even "boring," "expressionless," or "annoying." As with MSS, several respondents claimed FSS "would make [them] fall asleep" and that this lack of dynamism negatively affected that voice's persuasiveness. In a similar way as for MSS, the most negative New Zealand respondents expressed their dislike of FSS by describing it as, "creepy," "dreary," "weird," and even "morbid" and as too seductive and "manipulating," a stance that made some feel uncomfortable, as expressed in these comments:

> The voice sounds too seductive and makes the listener feel uncomfortable. The voice also doesn't sound very credible or trustworthy, making me less likely to want to buy their product/service.

> Made me feel way too uncomfortable. It makes me feel as if the product has a negative connotation and thus I'm doing something morally wrong when buying it.

Nevertheless, as our quantitative results revealed, and our qualitative analysis confirmed, a third of comments expressed by New Zealanders about FSS were neutral and a quarter were positive. The New Zealand respondents who liked FSS did so because of its "calming," "soothing," "polite," and "gentle approach to the listener" that made it "easy to listen to:"

> Voice is not overpowering so is enjoyable and easier to understand.

> Easy to listen to, it is relaxing but gets the message across.

> It's calm and relaxing. I don't feel nagged when listening to the voice.

However, despite these positive points, the main drawback of FSS according to New Zealand respondents was its lack of energy and power to attract their attention, as expressed in this comment:

> Relaxing and calm but not something that would grab your attention.

Whilst many New Zealanders expressed mixed feeling for FSS, most French respondents commented positively on it. French respondents recurrently commented that FSS was "soothing" and "pleasant" to listen to. They enjoyed its lack of aggressiveness, which they found respectful toward the audience. They found the female soft sell's "calm" and "appeasing" stance, attractive and attention grabbing with many noting—contrary to most New Zealand respondents—that this vocal style made them want to listen to the content of the message. They enjoyed its "soft and "relaxing" tone which they perceived as reassuring and inspiring confidence and trust:

> Calm, soft, appeasing, makes you want to listen to what it's got to say.

> A composed voice allows relaxation and a break with a world in which everything is going too fast.

Overall, our analysis shows that, while FSS engenders comparable negative or positive types of feelings across countries, it also confirms that the proportion of respondents liking or disliking it and the intensity of their feelings varies according to countries. In this case, French respondents had a more positive attitude toward FSS than New Zealanders who exhibited more mixed feelings toward it. These mixed feelings, together with a rating close to average for liking, suggest a potential for this vocal style in New Zealand.

Gender combined results for attitude (liking)

When looking at the results for the gender-combined hard sell and soft sell vocal styles (HSMF and SSMF) we find that French respondents clearly disliked the hard sell vocal style (HSMF) whilst New Zealanders had a significantly more favorable attitude toward it. The two-way ANOVA test revealed a statistically significant difference in means between New Zealand and France, $F(1,623) = 54.87$, $p < 0.01$ (see Table 3).

Results for the soft-sell vocal style (SSMF) show the opposite pattern, revealing that French respondents liked it whereas New Zealanders had a significantly less positive attitude (below

average liking) toward it. The two-way ANOVA test revealed a statistically significant difference in means between New Zealand and France, $F(1,623) = 84.52$, $p < 0.01$ (see Table 3).

Familiarity with the voices

In this section, we present the difference in familiarity with the voices within each country and across countries. Table 5 presents the means calculations for each voice within each country as well as the results of the two-way ANOVA, indicating differences in familiarity with the four voices across countries. Table 5 also includes results for the gender combined hard sell and soft sell vocal styles (HSMF and SSMF), including paired *t*-tests for the within-country analyses.

RQ2: Does consumers' familiarity with the voices differ within countries?

For New Zealand, the most familiar voice was the Male Hard Sell ($M_{New\ Zealand\ MHS} = 6.15$, $SD = 0.87$) followed closely by the Female Hard Sell voice ($M_{New\ Zealand\ FHS} = 6.13$, $SD = 1.03$). The least familiar voice was Female Soft Sell ($M_{New\ Zealand\ FSS} = 3.78$, $SD = 1.70$). As Table 5 also shows, results for New Zealand, gender combined, show that there was a significant difference in the familiarity scores between HSMF ($M_{New\ Zealand\ HSMF} = 6.14$, $SD = .96$) and SSMF ($M_{New\ Zealand\ SSMF} = 3.88$, $SD = 1.73$); $t(188) = 23.70$, $p < 0.01$ showing that New Zealand respondents were clearly more familiar with the hard-sell vocal style. The paired *t*-tests conducted between each voice and reported in Table 6 also indicate that New Zealanders exhibited the same high level of familiarity with MHS and FHS. These results also show that MHS and FHS were significantly more familiar to New Zealanders than MSS and FSS.

For French respondents, the most familiar voice was the Female Soft Sell ($M_{France\ FSS} = 3.96$, $SD = 1.74$) followed closely by the Male Hard Sell voice ($M_{France\ MHS} = 3.93$, $SD = 1.89$) (see Table 5). The least familiar voice was Female Hard Sell ($M_{France\ FHS} = 3.61$, $SD = 2.04$). As Table 5 also shows, results for France, gender combined, show no significant difference between HSMF ($M_{France\ HSMF} = 3.77$, $SD = 1.97$) and SSMF ($M_{France\ SSMF} = 3.87$, $SD = 1.75$); $t(124) = -0.54$, $p = 0.139$ indicating that overall the French, did not have a clear familiarity for either the hard-sell or the soft-sell vocal style. The paired *t*-tests conducted between each voice and reported in Table 6 confirm this, showing that French respondents did not assess any one of these voices as being significantly more familiar than the others.

Table 5. Results of two-way ANOVA where group variable is familiarity toward the vocal style and category variable is country.

Gender separated	MHS	FHS	MSS	FSS	Mean difference	*t*-Stat
New Zealand						
Mean	6.15	6.13	3.97	3.78		
Standard deviation	0.87	1.03	1.75	1.7		
Percentage of response over 4 (scale of 1–7)	96.81%	94.68%	44.68%	39.36%		
France						
Mean	3.93	3.61	3.77	3.96		
Standard deviation	1.89	2.04	1.75	1.74		
Percentage of response over 4 (scale of 1–7)	46.77%	40.32%	40.32%	50%		
Mean difference	2.22***	2.52***	0.20	−0.18		
F test	196.38	205.63	0.96	0.67		
Df	1310	1310	1310	1310		
Gender combined	HSMF hard sell		SSMF soft sell			
New Zealand						
Mean	6.14		3.88		2.25***	23.70
Standard deviation	0.96		1.73			
Percentage of response over 4 (on a scale of 1–7)	95.75%		42.02%			
France						
Mean	3.77		3.87		−0.09	−0.54
Standard deviation	1.97		1.75			
Percentage of response over 4 (on a scale of 1–7)	43.55%		45.16%			
Mean difference	2.37***		0.01			
F test	400.82		0.02			
Df	1622		1622			

***$p < 0.01$.

Table 6. Mean difference between each voice within each country: familiarity.

			MHS		FHS		MSS	
			France	NZ	France	NZ	France	NZ
			Second most familiar	Most familiar	Least familiar	Second most familiar	Second least familiar	Second least familiar
FHS	France	Least familiar	−0.320 −1.281 $p = .2013$					
	NZ	Second most familiar		−0.020 −0.203 $p = .8389$				
MSS	France	Second least familiar	−0.160 −0.692 $p = .4898$		0.160 0.663 $p = .5080$			
	NZ	Second least familiar		−2.180 −15.295***		−2.160 −14.585***		
FSS	France	Most familiar	0.030 0.130 $p = .8966$		0.350 1.154 $p = .1473$		0.190 0.857 $p = .3921$	
	NZ	Least familiar		−2.370 −17.016***		−2.350 −16.211***		−0.190 −1.068 $p = .2863$

The top figure in each cell is the mean difference, the second figure is the *t*-statistic, and the third one is the *p*-value.
*$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

RQ4: Does consumers' familiarity with the voices differ across countries?

Difference in familiarity with MHS across countries

Our study shows marked differences in familiarity across countries in relation to MHS with New Zealand respondents expressing very high familiarity with it whereas French respondents displayed much less familiarity with it. The two-way ANOVA test revealed a statistically significant difference in means between New Zealand and France, $F(1,310) = 196.38$, $p < 0.01$ (see Table 5).

Difference in familiarity with FHS across countries

Results also show marked differences across countries in relation to FHS, with New Zealand respondents expressing very high familiarity with it whereas French respondents displayed much less familiarity with it. The two-way ANOVA test revealed a statistically significant difference in means between New Zealand and France, $F(1,310) = 205.63$, $p < 0.01$.

Difference in familiarity with MSS across countries

Our study shows no significant difference in familiarity across countries in relation to MSS. The two-way ANOVA test revealed no statistically significant difference in means between New Zealand and France, $F(1,310) = 0.96$, $p = .03272$.

Difference in familiarity with FSS across countries

Results also show no significant difference in familiarity across countries in relation to the female soft sell voice. The two-way ANOVA test revealed no statistically significant difference in means between New Zealand and France, $F(1,310) = 0.67$, $p = .04152$.

Gender combined results for familiarity

When looking at the results for the gender combined hard sell and soft sell vocal styles (HSMF and SSMF) we find that New Zealanders were extremely familiar with the hard sell vocal style (HSMF) whilst French respondents showed much less familiarity with it. The two-way ANOVA test revealed a statistically significant difference in familiarity with HSMF between New Zealand and France, $F(1,622) = 400.82$, $p < 0.01$ (see Table 5).

There was no difference in familiarity across countries in relation to the soft-sell vocal style (SSMF). The two-way ANOVA test did not reveal any statistically significant difference in familiarity for SSMF between New Zealand and France, $F(1,622) = 0.02$, $p = 0.90$ (see Table 5).

Assessing the exposure-affect relationship

Next, we wanted to determine whether there was a relationship between consumers' familiarity with a vocal style (MHS, FHS, MSS, FSS, HSMF,

Table 7. SEM results where independent variable is familiarity with the vocal style and dependent variable is attitude (liking) toward the vocal style (New Zealand).

Gender separated	MHS	FHS	MSS	FSS
Familiarity—β	0.63***	0.53***	0.80***	0.88***
Z score	34.22	26.15	27.29	29.90
Chi square	12.21	14.77	71.49	77.30
CFI	1	1	1	1
TLI	1	1	1	1
SRMR	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
N	188	188	188	188
Gender combined	HSMF hard sell		SSMF soft sell	
Familiarity—β	0.58***		0.84***	
Z score	41.65		40.16	
Chi square	26.74		149.22	
CFI	1		1	
TLI	1		1	
SRMR	0.00		0.00	
N	376		376	

***$p < 0.01$.

Table 8. SEM results where independent variable is familiarity with the vocal style and dependent variable is attitude (liking) toward the vocal style (France).

Gender separated	MHS	FHS	MSS	FSS
Familiarity—β	0.69***	0.54***	1.09***	1.05***
Z score	19.61	17.95	27.17	23.35
Chi square	41.52	26.18	110.41	106.94
CFI	1	1	1	1
TLI	1	1	1	1
SRMR	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
N	124	124	124	124
Gender combined	HSMF hard sell		SSMF soft sell	
Familiarity—β	0.62***		1.071***	
Z score	26.07		35.38	
Chi square	61.04		214.04	
CFI	1		1	
TLI	1		1	
SRMR	0.00		0.00	
N	248		248	

***$p < 0.01$.

SSMF), and their attitude (liking or disliking) toward it (RQ5). Tables 7 and 8 summarize the results of the SEM analysis for each country and each of the vocal styles.

We observe that, in both countries, there is a stronger link between familiarity and liking for the soft sell voices. In New Zealand, familiarity was consistent with liking for FSS and SSMF, although a bit less consistent for MSS. New Zealanders were not particularly familiar with soft sell voices and did not particularly like them either. In France, the relationship between familiarity and liking for the soft sell voices was not as strong as for New Zealand, with below average familiarity for MSS, FSS, and SSMF and moderate liking for these. Overall, in both countries, the relationship between familiarity for, and liking of, the hard sell voices was weaker than for the soft sell voices. In New Zealand, high familiarity with the hard-sell voices did not translate into much liking for these, especially for FHS. A similar but weaker relationship was observed in France. Below average familiarity with the hard sell voices (MHS, FHS, and HSMF) translated into low liking of these voices.

Overall, we observe that soft sell liking has a stronger relationship with familiarity when compared to hard sell. Therefore, advertising using soft sell, in New Zealand and France, will be more appealing to consumers.

Discussion and implications

The aim of this cross-cultural study was to explore consumers' attitude toward, and familiarity with, the hard-sell and soft-sell advertising vocal styles in two countries (France and New Zealand) in order to uncover whether these preferences are universal or influenced by consumers' cultural advertising vocal environment. Our quantitative and qualitative findings converge to show that consumers from different cultural environments do indeed have different advertising vocal familiarities and preferences and thus advertisers should take into consideration cultural idiosyncrasies when designing advertising vocal strategies.

Lessons from New Zealand

Our study showed that in terms of attitude (liking), New Zealanders did not have any clear preference for either the hard sell or soft sell vocal style (HSMF or SSMF) and expressed fairly consistent below average liking for all four voices. New Zealanders' most liked voice was the male hard sell (MHS), in line with New Zealand's high masculinity index which values assertiveness and competitiveness. Interestingly, however, New Zealanders' least liked voice was the Female hard sell (FHS). Thus, in New Zealand, when it comes to the hard sell style, there appears to be a gender bias against the female voice. This was reflected in several prejudiced comments from New Zealanders questioning the suitability of a female voice for the hard sell style:

> Really annoying since it's a girl shouting (NZ comment on FHS)

> I find that feminine voices are not the best for advertising, they are not hard sell, and just have an annoying sound to them when they are made sound excitable. (NZ comment on FHS)

Therefore, it seems that in a culture that supports a traditional view of masculine traits (assertiveness, competitiveness, admiration of the strong), such as New Zealand, a commanding male hard sell voice projecting power and assertiveness is acceptable, but a female hard sell voice is not as it may not fit with the cultural expectations of that masculine culture.

In sum, New Zealanders' consistent average liking for both vocal styles can be related to the inconsistent postulations made earlier. Since New Zealand has a high masculinity index, New Zealanders may not particularly like soft sell voices because they are not commanding enough and do not convey enough assertiveness and competitiveness. Since New Zealand has a low power-distance index, New Zealanders may also not particularly like the hard sell voices either because they are too "top down," commanding voices, projecting authority, power, and asymmetrical communication than soft sell voices.

In terms of familiarity, New Zealanders were much more familiar with the hard-sell vocal styles, than with the soft-sell styles. Since previous content analyses of advertising have shown that New Zealand tends to be a hard-sell advertising environment (Desmarais, 2000, 2003, 2004), we suggest that New Zealanders' high familiarity with hard-sell vocal styles could indeed be due to them being repeatedly exposed to hard-sell. New Zealanders' high familiarity with the hard-sell vocal styles however, only translated into below average liking for it which suggests that hard sell's frequent use by advertisers in New Zealand may be leading to a vocal wear out phenomenon, making this style tiresome and inefficient as suggested in respondents' comments, such as these:

> I have heard many ads delivered in this manner and have grown accustomed to it. This delivery style no longer has any massive impact on me when listening. (NZ comment on MHS)

> Voices like this get over-used on t.v and never persuade me to buy what they are trying to sell. (NZ comment on FHS)

> The voice was too generic, we hear it all the time. (NZ comment on MHS)

> It is the same voice you hear on commercials everyday, there is nothing exciting about it or new. (NZ comment on FHS)

Advertisers in New Zealand should question the frequent use of the hard-sell vocal style. Is it worth using it so much if it is only eliciting average liking in the case of the male hard-sell voice, and is clearly disliked in the case of the female hard-sell voice? In the case of the female hard-sell vocal style, which is very familiar to, but irritating for, New Zealanders, advertisers may actually put off consumers and seriously lower ad effectiveness by using it.

An opportunity may therefore exist for advertisers in New Zealand to develop the soft sell style more. New Zealanders' below average familiarity with this style shows they are not exposed to it much, because it is not a big part of the New Zealand advertising environment, as previous studies have shown (Desmarais, 2000, 2003, 2004). Interestingly, New Zealanders also showed just as much liking for the soft sell voices as the hard-sell voices which suggests that advertisers may be underusing soft-sell voices. Advertisers should try to capitalize on New Zealanders' moderate liking for this underused vocal style, especially the female soft sell which they prefer to the often-used female hard sell voice. Using an unfamiliar vocal style could have a cut through effect and generate good audience attention.

Lessons from France

For France, respondents expressed the highest familiarity with the female soft sell style. This finding on the familiarity of FSS in France supports other studies that have shown the frequent use of female soft sell voices in that country (Desmarais, 2000, 2003, 2004) and the prevalence of soft sell in general (Biswas et al., 1992; Taylor et al., 1996). However, strangely, the French results also reveal that the male hard sell voice

was almost as familiar as the female soft sell voice. Therefore, unlike New Zealanders, French respondents did not have a clear familiarity with either the hard-sell or the soft-sell vocal style. Surprisingly, their below average familiarity with soft-sell vocal styles does not reflect previous studies' findings that France is a soft-sell advertising environment or a feminine country. These unusual findings may be due to the fact that most studies showing France is a soft sell environment date back to the early 2000s. It is possible that France's advertising vocal environment has changed since then and that the soft and hard-sell vocal styles are used more equally these days than they were in the 90s and 2000s.

Despite having no clear familiarity with either style, French respondents clearly liked the soft-sell vocal style significantly more than the hard-sell. This is not totally surprising since France is a soft sell environment and France is a feminine country and therefore one might expect the French to prefer soft sell voices that convey warmth, cordiality, and intimacy.

However, France is also a country that scores high on power distance, and as a result, we could also expect the French not to mind commanding hard sell voices projecting less intimacy but more power, distance, impersonality, and coldness than soft sell voices. This expectation was not confirmed in our study; in fact, the hard-sell style generated considerable irritation from them. This intense dislike was made clear through qualitative comments describing the hard-sell vocal style as too loud, pushy, promotional, and untrustworthy. Such negative consumer responses to explicit persuasive tactics by advertising messages or sales representatives have been labeled by marketing researchers as reactance theory (Clee & Wicklund, 1980; Koslow, 2000; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974). According to reactance theory, the perceived selling intent in advertising is likely to threaten consumer freedom, provoke their skepticism, and lower their evaluation of the advertised product. While our research did not link vocal styles to specific products it does show that the hard-sell vocal style in itself can trigger consumer resistance to messages and prompt a boomerang effect in terms of marketing communication, and as a result, the intent to produce positive effects with hard-sell vocal styles can actually generate negative outcomes. The female hard-sell vocal style proved particularly unpopular and engendered the most reactance from the French—in a similar way as for New Zealanders—generating sentiments of oppression, stress, disrespect, and skepticism, creating a far from optimal vocal context for an advertising message. As with New Zealanders, several French respondents questioned the suitability of a female voice for the hard sell style, noting that they were "not used to hearing such a shouty female voice" and that "making a woman shout in an ad may seem inappropriate."

Therefore, it seems that in a culture that supports a traditional view of feminine traits (nurture, friendliness, and being in touch with one's own feelings), such as France, a commanding male hard sell voice projecting power and assertiveness is acceptable, but a female voice is not as it may not fit with the cultural expectations of that feminine culture.

Overall, this clear dislike by the French for the hard-sell vocal style, suggests that, even though it is not used much in France, it may still be used too frequently by advertisers. Indeed, is there any point in using a vocal style that consumers really dislike? On the other hand, the study shows that French respondents liked the soft-sell vocal style, especially the female soft-sell voice which was considered as appeasing, reassuring, and inspiring confidence and trust. Thus, a moderate amount of familiarity with soft-sell vocal styles translated into strong liking, suggesting that, since it is well-liked, this type of vocal style could be used even more in the French context.

Soft-sell: an edge over hard-sell

Overall, our research across two countries complements and concurs with other research showing that the soft-sell appeal is better accepted than hard-sell (Alden et al., 1999; Amine et al., 2005; Okazaki et al., 2013). Our qualitative findings have shown that the soft-sell vocal style is more likely to generate favorable attitudes than the hard-sell which tends to induce much more advertising irritation. The fact that soft-sell voices generate very favorable attitudes in what is considered a predominantly soft-sell environment

(France) but also close to neutral attitudes in what is considered a predominantly hard-sell environment (New Zealand) suggests that the soft-sell style can be considered best, universally, to reach consumer audiences than the hard-sell style and that, for instance, it may be the most appropriate vocal style as part of a global consumer culture positioning (GCCP) strategy.

Do consumers prefer familiar vocal styles?

Clearly, more research is needed in this area, but overall, this study indicates that repeated exposure to an advertising vocal stimulus in a cultural environment translates into positive affect toward it in most cases. Noticeably, in each country, quantitative and qualitative data coincide to show that the preferred voice was the most familiar (in France, the female soft-sell, in New Zealand the male hard-sell) and that the least familiar voice was the least liked (in France, the Female soft sell) suggesting an exposure-affect relationship (Zajonc, 1968) in most cases, in other words that consumers' liking/disliking of a vocal style may be linked to the repetition of these specific advertising vocal styles in their cultural environment. This finding across two countries in relation to the most familiar and preferred vocal styles suggests that consumers are cultural beings whose attitude (liking) toward vocal styles may be influenced by the repetition of specific vocal styles circulating in their advertising cultural environment.

Overall, our results show that vocal preferences are not universal but can be influenced by culture. Global marketers must realize that to be effective, a voice's delivery style should not simply be suitable for a product and/or target as is usually assumed, but also be congruent with the culture within which it circulates. Vocal approach strategy in advertising is a complex affair not only involving micro marketing communication decisions but also careful cultural considerations. Although consumers tend to like vocal styles they are familiar with, advertisers should not necessarily conform to the status quo and be conservative when choosing an advertising voice. Trying to use a soft-sell voice in a cultural environment in which this type of voice is not familiar or liked could be a cultural communicative risk but could also provide the cut-through needed and better advertising effectiveness. Undoubtedly, global marketers should familiarize themselves with the cultural vocal environment and position themselves accordingly.

Limitations and future 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 solid claims about strategy.

The focus on young consumers is another limitation of this research. The study is based on a sample of young consumers and therefore its results may not be applicable to the entire population of these two countries. Indeed, a sample of older respondents for instance, with different media consumption habits than young consumers (Morton, 2023), may have produced different results. Further research with other generations or types of respondents is needed to explore and possibly reveal difference preferences for, and familiarity with, specific vocal styles. The findings of our research are nevertheless important given the growing influence and purchasing power of young consumers (Afterpay, 2022; Mitrofanoff, 2019; Pollard, 2021). Insights from young consumers can help anticipate future market and communication developments, including, we believe, in relation to advertising voice preference.

One limitation of this study concerns the choice of language for our voices. For this research, we were confronted with a dilemma faced by many cross cultural studies. We could have chosen to use two different languages, French for France, and English for New Zealand; however, the study would have been criticized for not using a consistent language across the two countries, especially as French and English are stressed differently and differ phonetically. Adopting this two-languages method would have meant proposing a very different message (semantically and phonetically) to each respondent group, which would have compromised

comparability. In the end, the English language was selected as it has become a universal language and is familiar and understood in both New Zealand and France. Using the same message, in the same language allowed for better comparability.

Another limitation of our study is the fact it purposely used a neutral, non-product-specific advertising message so respondents would first and foremost focus on the voice characteristics of the advertising message and would not be influenced by elements that can affect processing of the message, such as product type, product involvement, and country of origin. Further cross-cultural studies could now explore the relationship between hard-sell and soft-sell vocal styles and product type to understand which vocal style, across cultures, is perceived as most appropriate for a specific product category.

Finally, while we qualitatively explored consumers' reasons for liking the vocal styles, we did not explore why they thought they were familiar with them. Familiarity with a vocal style may be due to other factors than repeated exposure to it. For example, the pronounced New Zealand familiarity with the hard-sell style may be due to the fact that the hard-sell vocal style is more salient than soft-sell due to its louder harder hitting style; as a result, it may be noticed more by audiences and this may influence respondents to rate it as being more familiar. This salience of hard-sell vocal styles may also explain why, despite France having been shown to be a soft-sell environment in previous studies, the soft-sell vocal style was not rated as much more familiar than the hard-sell vocal style. Research studying what makes a voice familiar could shed light on this aspect.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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