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Assertive Environmental Advertising and Reactance: Differences Between South Koreans and Americans

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In three studies, the authors show that Americans and South Koreans react differently to environmental advertising campaigns featuring assertive messages that threaten autonomous freedoms. The findings uphold their hypothesis that cultural differences determine whether consumers will show reactance to assertive advertising campaigns. Study 1 demonstrates that Americans are less receptive to an assertive recycling message using imperatives such as *should*, *must*, and *ought* and more receptive to a nonassertive message using *could*, *might*, and *worth*. South Koreans do not show the reactance response. Study 2, an energy-saving campaign, conceptually replicates the findings and further shows that perceived threat to freedom mediates the effects. Study 3 uses a realistic setting (i.e., online magazine) to further support the hypothesis that cultural differences affect attitudes toward assertive messages, but adds perceived politeness as an underlying second mediator.

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Advertising can trigger psychological reactance that then negatively affects persuasion (Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002; Yoon, Choi, and Song 2011). In particular, advertisers who intend to persuade by using assertive, emphatic, and controlling messages can find that their attempts backfire, as has been documented in the fields of marketing (e.g., Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004; Lord 1994) and communications (e.g., Dillard and Shen 2005; Kellerman and Shea 1996), and in the contexts of interpersonal (e.g., Quick and Stephenson 2007) and health-related behaviors (e.g., Quick and Considine 2008). Ironically, many real-world campaigns try to change consumer behavior by using assertive language, despite its countereffectiveness. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's "Click It or Ticket" campaign is one of the assertive slogans so often used by prosocial campaigns (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012b).

Researchers in advertising, psychology, and linguistics explain this counterintuitive phenomenon—that assertiveness weakens persuasiveness—in the framework of reactance and politeness theories (Brehm 1966; Brehm and Brehm 1981; Brown and Levinson 1987; Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002). That is, message recipients can perceive that their autonomous freedom is threatened by requests that are too assertive, too explicit, and too obtrusive. Assertive requests cause people to react with anger and rejection of the advocacy (Brehm and Brehm 1981; O'Keefe 1997). At the core of reactance theory is the desire to maintain freedom.

Most studies of assertiveness–reactance relationships have drawn samples from Western cultures, however, and have failed to consider that reactance may be psychologically unique to European-centered worldviews (Jonas et al. 2009).

Although some research has investigated whether reactance behaviors vary across cultures, the literature is largely incomplete because studies have failed to consider message assertiveness or have focused only on one culture. Two research streams relevant to our research provide conflicting findings. First, a study comparing an assertive and nonassertive advertising message (“Buy now!” versus “Opportunities await!”) found that assertive language was linked with perceived threat to freedom, but the sample came from South Korea only and lacked a Western counterpart (Quick and Kim 2009). A contrasting study showed that threats to individual freedom are less disturbing to individuals with collectivistic cultural backgrounds than to individuals with individualistic cultural backgrounds (Jonas et al. 2009). Although the findings indicated that reactance has cross-cultural differences, the studies were scenario based and lacked message assertiveness. That is, participants were asked to imagine themselves in highly threatening or nonthreatening situations. To reconcile the contrasting views, we conducted three studies to empirically consider the following questions: Do people steeped in Asian culture value autonomous freedom as deeply as those steeped in Western culture? Do they show similar reactance behavior? On a practical level, should marketers expect that assertive slogans will always dampen the overall effectiveness of persuasive messages?

To answer those questions, we undertook three experimental studies and compared individuals from two cultures, American and South Korean, building on previous research regarding message assertiveness (Baek, Yoon, and Kim 2015; Bensley and Wu 1991; Dillard and Shen 2005; Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012a, 2012b; Quick and Considine 2008; Quick and Stephenson 2007; Wilson and Kunkel 2000) and reactance (Brehm 1966; Brehm and Brehm 1981; Dillard and Shen 2005; Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002; Miller et al. 2007; Noguti and Russel 2014; O’Keefe 1997). We extend the previous research by adding the South Korean context and showing why people from American and South Korean cultures might respond with varied levels of reactance to assertive messages.

Specifically, we argue that Eastern cultures may erase the adverse effect of message assertiveness on persuasion commonly found in Western cultures (e.g., Lord 1994; Shrum, Lowery, and McCarty 1994). Prior findings regarding reactance explain that Western consumers tend to have individualistic cultural values so that they perceive assertive messages as a coercive threat to their autonomous freedom, which then weakens persuasion and triggers reactance behavior. In other words, assertive messages will discourage compliance. We suggest that in Eastern cultures, however, individuals tend to have collectivistic cultural values and will perceive assertive messages to be acceptable persuasion rather than a threat to individual freedom.

In Study 1, we tested our hypothesis—that Americans will respond negatively to assertive messages but South Koreans will not—using an advertising message encouraging recycling

behavior. In Study 2, we tested the hypothesis using an advertising message advocating energy-saving behavior. In Study 3, we tested the hypothesis in a realistic setting with an ad inserted in an online magazine. In addition, we examined perceived threat to freedom and perceived politeness as mediators, and found that different perceptions of threat to freedom and politeness are indeed the mechanism underlying cross-cultural differences in the reception of message assertiveness. We begin by looking at the key variables of our research: message assertiveness and reactance.

MESSAGE ASSERTIVENESS

Persuasive campaigns frequently use assertive language. Marketers adopt such message strategies because assertive language is simple in its form and clear in its meaning. However, the simplicity and clarity of an assertive message sometimes opens the advocated view to critical scrutiny (O’Keefe 1997) and leaves little doubt as to the message sender’s persuasive intention (Miller et al. 2007). Consequently, assertive persuasion often has a boomerang effect: Audiences refuse to comply (e.g., Quick and Considine 2008; Quick and Stephenson 2007; Wilson and Kunkel 2000). Prior marketing and mass communication research has provided abundant evidence documenting this counterintuitive phenomenon: that assertively phrased persuasion often generates negative responses (e.g., Baek, Yoon, and Kim 2015; Dillard and Shen 2005; Gibbs 1986; Holtgraves 1991; Yoon, Choi, and Song 2011).

The boomerang effect of message assertiveness in for-profit and nonprofit advertising messages has been documented in various contexts. For example, a study of message assertiveness used commercial messages, such as “You must try our chocolate” (versus “It’s worth trying”), and reported that assertive tones are more likely to backfire for hedonic commercial products (e.g., chocolate) than for utilitarian products (e.g., banking) (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012a). However, more recent evidence indirectly suggests that social and environmental persuasion messages are particularly subject to backfiring effects (e.g., Baek and Yoon 2017; Baek, Yoon, and Kim 2015; Kronrod, Wathieu, and Grinstein 2012a; Yoon, Kim, and Baek 2016). It is disturbing to recognize that nonprofit messages intended to promote social and environmental issues for the betterment of society could be more vulnerable to disdain than for-profit marketing messages. For example, assertive slogans such as the Ad Council’s “Only you can prevent forest fires,” Greenpeace’s “Stop the catastrophe,” and Denver Water’s “Use only what you need” may repel consumers, while Nike’s “Just do it,” Sprite’s “Obey your thirst,” and Wendy’s “Do what tastes right” may persuade them to buy products and services.

Somewhat ironically, North American consumers seemingly perceive that for-profit marketers are justified in using assertive persuasions but nonprofit marketers are not. That is, consumers appear to readily accept assertive messages for

commercial burgers and sodas, but they perceive nonprofit social campaigns for green behavior as threats to their individual freedom. Perhaps they feel that no one has the right to command them to be socially friendly (Zollo et al. forthcoming); rather, they should be free to choose their social and environmental behavior. When consumers perceive that they are being ordered to recycle or save energy, they might feel that their free will is threatened and will then be defiant. To describe this peculiar counterpersuasive resistance, psychologists use the term *reactance* (Brehm 1966; Brehm and Brehm 1981); linguists call it *politeness* (Brown and Levinson 1987). But will consumers in non-Western cultures show similar reactance behaviors? Next, we draw on the persuasion and psychology literature to guide our pursuit of an answer to that question.

REACTANCE, POLITENESS, AND CULTURE

Reactance theory provides an explanatory framework showing why message assertiveness generates negative responses. Reactance, defined as “the motivational state that is hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination” (Brehm and Brehm 1981, p. 37), spurs individuals to resist pressures threatening their freedom of choice (Baek and Morimoto 2012; Knowles and Linn 2004). The theory proposes that nonassertive messages assure message recipients they are free to choose an advocated behavior (e.g., to purchase a particular brand of soap), but assertive messages threaten their freedom to choose and produce psychological reactance (Brehm 1966; Noguti and Russell 2014; Phillips and Noble 2007). Assertive messages motivate message recipients to reestablish the threatened freedom by resisting the recommended behavior or acting alternatively. For example, they might avoid the advertised brand and buy the competing brand instead.

The boomerang reactance effect has been well documented. In their classic study, Weiner and Brehm (1966) found that using a nonassertive message, “Please try,” motivated consumers to purchase more of a product, while an assertive message, “You are going to buy,” made them purchase less. Similarly, Pennebaker and Sanders (1976) showed that patrons were more likely to draw graffiti on the walls of a public bathroom when a sign on the door ordered, “Do not write on these walls under any circumstances.” In contrast, patrons were more compliant when the sign said, “Please do not write on these walls.” What forces could be driving reactance?

Freedom of choice—beliefs that individuals have the right to behave autonomously—is at the core of the concept of reactance (Brehm and Brehm 1981). Free choice is a highly valued and essential component of self-concept and sense of control (e.g., Schwartz 2000, 2004). Particularly in Western cultures, individuals desire to pursue happiness according to their preferences, goals, intentions, and motives (Markus and Kitayama 2003). However, when they confront an assertive message

demanding that they take certain actions, they perceive that the messenger is usurping their freedom of choice and they are losing control. Because Western cultures perceive control as a key aspect of self-concept, North Americans who face assertive messages are likely to exhibit reactance in their effort to reclaim their self-identity. Here, the perceived undermining of the self-concept prompts reactance.

The linguistic use of the word *politeness* approaches reactance from a slightly different angle. According to politeness theory, nonassertive messages are courteous; assertive messages are rude. Nonassertive messages use a face-saving strategy allowing targeted audiences to maintain their desires to hold and project positive images (Foley 1997). In contrast, assertive messages seem to disregard and threaten needs to maintain face (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Particularly relevant to our research is Brown and Levinson’s (1987) research regarding the threats to face occurring when freedom of action appears to be obstructed. People need to protect their positive face; they want to be accepted, liked, and treated as a member of the group. In addition, they want to protect their negative face by maintaining independence, freedom of action, and freedom from imposition (Goffman 1967). Thus, nonimposing messages are a strategy of negative politeness to avoid threatening message targets. For example, messages can be prefaced indirectly (e.g., “By the way, . . .”) or minimize imposition (e.g., “I just wanted to ask you if . . .”), hedging (e.g., “I think . . .”), or be softened with a question (“Why don’t you . . . ?”). Applying those findings to the reactance context, we find that negative politeness in the linguistics literature and reactance in the psychology literature tap into essentially the same concept from different angles: Both recognize threats to freedom as the underlying root cause of reactance behavior. That is, perceived threats to freedom lead to perceptions of impoliteness, which then provoke reactance.

Is reactance a universal response to assertive messages? Would individuals from Eastern cultures perceive similar threats to freedom and feel similar urges to defy assertive demands? Building on findings from advertising, persuasion, and cultural psychology (e.g., Jonas et al. 2009; Paek, Yu, and Bae 2009; Savani, Markus, and Conner 2008; Zhang 2009, 2010), we contend that Eastern cultures differ from Western cultures in their view of the self. Easterners will not perceive assertive messages as threatening their freedom, and consequently will show less reactance.

The advertising literature documents how Easterners and Westerners tend to perceive advertising messages quite differently (Choi and Miracle 2004; Choi, Yoon, and Taylor 2015; Kim, Han, and Yoon 2010; Lin 2001; Taylor and Okazaki 2015; Yoon 2013; Zhang 2010; Zhang and Gelb 1996). Third-person-effect research has consistently shown that individuals perceive that mass media persuasions will have greater effects on other people rather than themselves (Calfee and Ringold 1992; Ringold 2016). However, the effect varies across cultures. In contrast with South Koreans, Americans have

pronounced third-person perceptions and magnified self–other discrepancies (Park and Kim 2013).

In other words, an independent self-construal is more often evident in Western, individualistic cultures, where people tend to see the world within the frame of “I” versus “they” and thus feel a greater distance between themselves and the rest of the world. In contrast, an interdependent self-construal is more often evident in Eastern, collectivist cultures, where people tend to view the world within the frame of “we” versus “they” and thus feel a smaller distance between themselves and the world (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Independent self-construal primes Western cultural values and desires for freedom, whereas interdependent self-construal primes Eastern cultural values and desires for relationships (Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee 1999). Individuals in either culture may develop both independent and interdependent self-construals (Singelis 1994), yet within a specific culture, social customs, institutions, and beliefs tend to encourage the development of one over the other (Brewer and Gardner 1996). Hence, cultures tend to value and emphasize either independence or interdependence, so that members of the culture will tend to develop the favored self-construal (Triandis 1989).

By and large, research on advertising and cultural psychology supports our argument that reactance to assertive messages is unique to Western cultures where people tend to define themselves as unique, autonomous, and independent, and where freedom of choice is a core component of self-concept. In contrast, people in collectivist Eastern cultures tend to see themselves as acting interdependently; they focus on group harmony, interpersonal relations, and interdependence (e.g., Hofstede 1980; Markus and Kitayama 1991). Accordingly, they place less value on the freedom to choose and instead define their identity mainly through their interconnections with people and relevant group members.

Indeed, reactance has been shown to be correlated with personality traits typical for Western cultures, such as autonomy, dominance, independence, and uniqueness (Buboltz, Woller, and Pepper 1999; Dowd 1999; Dowd and Wallbrown 1993; Dowd et al. 1994; Imajo 2002). Similarly, Iyengar and Lepper (1999) found that Anglo American children were more motivated when they were allowed to make their own choices, but Asian American children were more motivated when their mothers or peers made decisions for them.

More relevant to our research, Savani, Markus, and Conner (2008) conducted a study in which they asked American and Indian participants in the free-choice condition to choose one of five black gel pens; participants in the usurped choice condition chose a pen, but the experimenter took it away and replaced it with another. The American participants showed reactance responses; they more favorably evaluated the pens they chose and less favorably evaluated the pens assigned to them. In contrast, the Indian participants favored the pens to the same extent in both conditions. Similarly, Jonas et al. (2009) demonstrated that people from Eastern cultures are less

sensitive to threats to individual freedom than people from Western cultures in various contexts, such as threats to their choice of dental care products.

In sum, advertising, persuasion, psychology, and linguistic research suggest that perceived threat to freedom and politeness perceptions largely explain culture-specific reactance behavior. Applying the logic to our context, we argue that individuals in Western cultures who encounter assertive messages will feel that their freedom is being usurped, will perceive the messages to be impolite, and ultimately will exhibit reactance behavior. In contrast, individuals in Eastern cultures who encounter assertive messages will not feel that their freedom is being usurped and will not exhibit reactance behavior. In other words, assertive messages will be less persuasive than nonassertive messages among Americans, but assertive and nonassertive messages will be equally persuasive among South Koreans.

H1 (Moderation): Americans will be less persuaded by assertive ad messages than by nonassertive ad messages, but South Koreans will be equally persuaded by assertive and nonassertive ad messages.

H2 (Mediation): (a) Perceived threat to freedom will mediate the effect of assertiveness on persuasion among Americans (assertiveness → threat to freedom → persuasion). (b) Perceived politeness will further mediate the effect of threat to freedom on persuasion among Americans (assertiveness → threat to freedom → politeness → persuasion).

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we tested responses to ad messages that advocated recycling. We tested hypothesis 1 using a 2 (nationality: Americans versus South Koreans) × 2 (message assertiveness: assertive versus nonassertive) between-subjects design.

Method

We recruited 132 U.S. undergraduate participants from a northeastern U.S. university and 175 South Korean participants from a university in Seoul, South Korea. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (i.e., assertive versus nonassertive message). Participants first viewed an advertisement with either an assertive or a nonassertive message advocating recycling. After viewing the ad, participants completed measures of attitudes.

The ad included headline copy, an image of a recycling bin, and a paragraph describing recycling benefits. Only the degree of message assertiveness varied in the copy. Adopted from Miller et al. (2007), the assertive message used imperatives such as *must*, *should*, and *ought*:

Recycle what you can: You have to recycle plastic containers, paper, cardboard, aluminum, and steel cans. You should definitely recycle more actively to conserve natural resources, such as water,

timber, and minerals. You must recycle as much as possible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global climate change. All you have to do is to place the clean and dry material loose into the recycling bin. In addition, you ought to remove lids and caps from containers when you recycle. There is really no choice! Do something to recycle!

Alternatively, the nonassertive message used suggestions, such as *could*, *might want to*, and *worth*:

It's worth recycling what you can: You could recycle plastic containers, paper, cardboard, aluminum, and steel cans. You might want to recycle more actively to conserve natural resources, such as water, timber, and minerals. You could recycle as much as possible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global climate change. It's worth placing the clean and dry material loose into the recycling bin. In addition, it makes sense to remove lids and caps from containers when you recycle. The choice is yours! You can do something to recycle!

Except for the message assertiveness manipulations, all other aspects of the ad stimuli were invariant in size, layout, and background (refer to Appendix 1).

Attitudes toward recycling were measured using 7-point semantic differential items anchored with *Bad/Good*, *Foolish/Wise*, *Negative/Positive*, and *Unfavorable/Favorable*, adopted from Blankenship and Wegener (2008). The four items were averaged to form an index for attitudes toward recycling.

For a manipulation check, we measured message assertiveness by having study participants respond to the statement "The ad message was assertive" on a 7-point scale anchored with *Strongly disagree* (1) and *Strongly agree* (7). For the South Korean participants, the English questionnaire and stimuli were translated into Korean by a bilingual translator, back-translated into English by a second bilingual translator, and adjusted by a third bilingual translator.

Results

The assertiveness manipulation was successful: Participants who viewed the assertive ad ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.61$) perceived the ad message to be more assertive than did participants who viewed the nonassertive ad ($M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 3.32$; $t(303) = 6.60$, $p < .01$).

To test the hypothesis, the attitude measure ($\alpha = .97$) was submitted to a 2 (nationality: Americans versus South Koreans) \times 2 (message assertiveness: assertive versus nonassertive) factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA). The nationality \times message assertiveness two-way interaction effect emerged ($F(1, 303) = 6.15$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$).

As Figure 1 shows, contrasts revealed that American participants showed more negative attitudes toward recycling ($t(130) = 2.27$, $p < .05$) when they saw the assertive ad ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.21$) rather than the nonassertive ad ($M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 5.79$), but South Korean participants showed no such difference ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.79$, $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 5.53$; $t(173) = 0.99$, $p = n.s.$). These results support hypothesis 1.

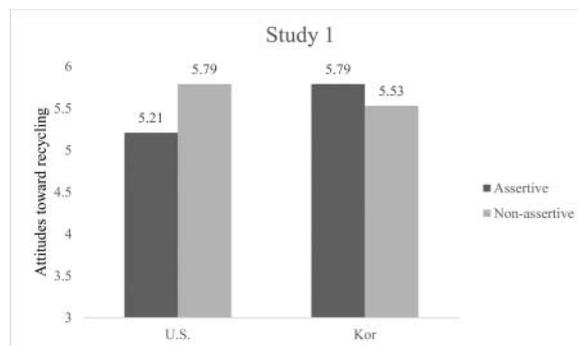


FIG. 1. Nationality \times message assertiveness interaction effect on attitudes toward recycling.

In addition, a main effect occurred for nationality, indicating that South Korean participants overall showed more positive attitudes toward recycling compared to American participants ($F(1, 303) = 8.93$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

Study 1 results demonstrate that Americans are less persuaded by assertive ad messages, but the same is not true for South Koreans; that is, South Koreans find assertive and nonassertive ad messages to be equally persuasive. Study 2 conceptually replicates these findings in a different context and explores the underlying mechanism for the observed effect.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we conceptually replicated the results from Study 1 (hypothesis 1) in a different environmental context—energy conservation—and extended our focus by testing whether perceived threat to freedom mediates the effect of message assertiveness on attitudes (hypothesis 2a). As in Study 1, we tested our hypotheses using a 2 (nationality: Americans versus South Koreans) \times 2 (message assertiveness: assertive versus nonassertive) between-subjects design.

Method

Participating in this study were 49 undergraduate students from a northeastern U.S. university and 66 South Korean undergraduate students from a university in Seoul, South Korea. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions: assertive versus nonassertive message. The other procedures were identical to those of Study 1 except that the stimulus ad advocated saving energy (refer to Appendix 2).

As in Study 1, the assertive message contained imperatives, including *must*, *should*, and *ought*:

Save energy: You must reduce overall energy consumption at home, school, and work. You must replace incandescent lightbulbs with Energy Star-qualified compact fluorescent lightbulbs. You

must turn off lights when you leave a room. You should unplug your electronics to save energy.

The nonassertive message emphasized autonomous actions, such as *could*, *might want to*, and *worth*:

It's worth saving energy: You could reduce overall energy consumption at home, school, and work. You could replace incandescent lightbulbs with Energy Star-qualified compact fluorescent lightbulbs. You could turn off lights when you leave a room. It's worth unplugging your electronics to save energy.

We employed the scale used in Study 1 to measure attitudes toward energy saving and message assertiveness. In addition, participants indicated whether they perceived the ad message to threaten their freedom to choose whether they would adopt energy-saving behaviors. Perceived threat to freedom was measured using 7-point scales (1 = *Strongly disagree* and 7 = *Strongly agree*) in response to statements adopted from Dillard and Shen (2005) ("The ad message threatened my freedom to choose" and "The ad message tried to make a decision for me").

Results

The assertiveness manipulation was successful: Participants who viewed the assertive ad ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.60$) perceived the ad message to be more assertive than did participants who viewed the nonassertive ad ($M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 3.98$; $t(113) = 2.06$, $p < .05$).

To test hypothesis 1, the attitude measure was submitted to a 2 (nationality: Americans versus South Koreans) \times 2 (message assertiveness: assertive versus nonassertive) factorial ANOVA. As in Study 1, the nationality \times message assertiveness two-way interaction effect emerged ($F(1, 111) = 16.21$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$).

As Figure 2 shows, contrasts revealed that American participants showed more negative attitudes toward energy conservation ($t(47) = 3.84$, $p < .05$) when they saw the assertive ad ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.48$) in contrast to the nonassertive ad ($M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 5.75$), but South Korean participants showed no such difference ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.46$, $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 5.20$; $t(64) = 0.23$, $p = \text{n.s.}$). These results again support hypothesis 1.

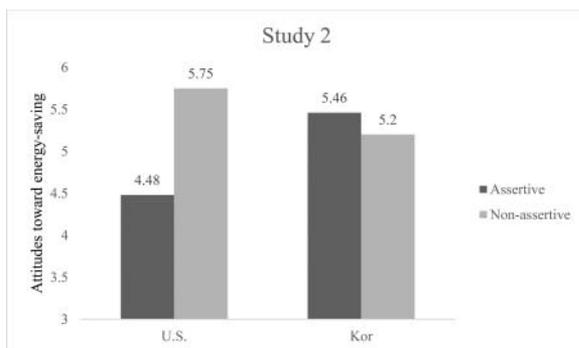


FIG. 2. Nationality \times message assertiveness interaction effect on attitudes toward energy saving.

In addition, a main effect occurred for message assertiveness, indicating that nonassertive messages overall produced more positive attitudes toward energy saving than did assertive messages ($F(1, 111) = 7.05$, $p < .01$).

Mediation Analysis

To investigate the processes underlying the effect of message assertiveness on attitudes toward energy saving, a series of mediation analyses was performed with perceived threat to freedom as the mediator, separately for each of the nationality conditions. In this study, a four-step approach suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986) was used for testing mediation.

As Figure 3 shows, for American participants, the results from mediation analyses with 5,000 bootstrap resamples (PROCESS Model 4; Hayes 2013) indicated that (a) message assertiveness (1 = assertive message, 0 = nonassertive message) significantly impacted attitudes toward energy saving ($B = -1.21$, $SE = .33$, $p < .001$); (b) message assertiveness significantly impacted perceived threat to freedom ($B = 1.42$, $SE = .51$, $p < .001$); (c) perceived threat to freedom significantly affected attitudes toward energy saving ($B = -.22$, $SE = .09$, $p < .05$); and (d) message assertiveness continued to significantly affect attitudes toward energy saving ($B = -.90$, $SE = .34$, $p < .01$) after controlling for perceived threat to freedom. As expected, the indirect effect through perceived threat to freedom was significant ($B = -.31$, $SE = .16$; 95% CI from $-.73$ to $-.06$). These findings meet the requirement for mediation for American participants. These results support hypothesis 2a. However, South Korean participants did not follow that pattern. Because the impact of message assertiveness on attitudes toward energy saving was no longer significant ($B = .26$, $SE = .22$, $p = \text{n.s.}$), one of the four conditions necessary for mediation analyses was not satisfied, suggesting lack of mediation by perceived threat to freedom for South Korean participants.

Discussion

Study 2 conceptually replicates the findings from Study 1: Americans were less persuaded by assertive ad messages, but South Koreans were equally persuaded by assertive and nonassertive ad messages.

In addition, the mediation analysis pinpoints reactance as mediating the observed cross-cultural differences regarding message assertiveness. Faced with assertive advertising messages, Americans perceive threats to their freedom to save energy as they choose. They then show reactive attitudes through lowered attitudes toward energy-saving behaviors. However, those South Koreans who view assertive and nonassertive messages do not significantly differ in their attitudes toward energy-saving behavior. Study 3 replicates the findings in a more natural setting and explores the second mediator: perceived politeness.

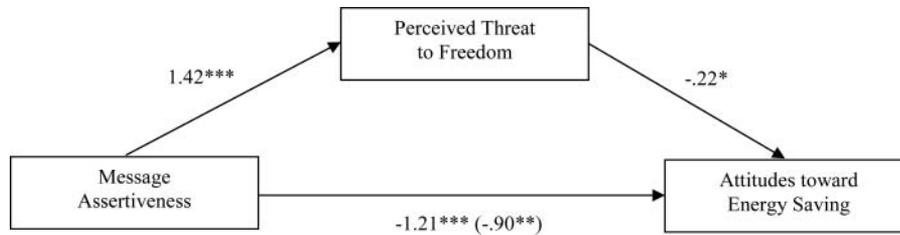


FIG. 3. The mediating role of perceived threat in the effect of message assertiveness for Americans. *Note:* Values in parentheses indicate effects from the simultaneous regression that included both message assertiveness and perceived threat to freedom as predictors; measured with 1 = assertive message and 0 = nonassertive message; the indirect effect through perceived threat to freedom was significant ($B = -.31$, $SE = .16$; 95% CI from $-.73$ to $-.06$; if a 95% CI does not include zero, it confirms mediation; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$).

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we conceptually replicated the results from Studies 1 and 2 (hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2a) in a more natural setting, using a realistic but fictitious online magazine. In addition, we further identified perceived politeness as a second mediator (hypothesis 2b).

Method

Study 3 had a 2 (nationality: Americans versus South Koreans) \times 2 (message assertiveness: assertive versus nonassertive) \times 2 (advertising context: environmental versus commercial) mixed-factorial design. Nationality and message assertiveness were between-subjects factors, and advertising context was a within-subjects factor. Participating in this study were 117 undergraduate students from a northeastern U.S. university and 116 South Korean undergraduate students from a university in Seoul, South Korea.

When participants entered the computer lab, they were instructed to carefully explore a fictitious online magazine called *Steam*. They were able to set their own pace as they flipped through a cover page, table of contents, two editorial articles, three filler ads, and two stimulus ads with either an assertive or a nonassertive message. One stimulus ad was an environmental message calling for recycling old mobile phones (refer to Appendix 3). The other was a commercial advertisement for a V8 beverage (refer to Appendix 4).

After participants freely browsed the online magazine, they indicated whether they would be likely to recycle old mobile phones and purchase the V8 drink on a three-item, 7-point scale anchored by *Unlikely/Likely*, *Impossible/Possible*, and *Improbable/Probable* (Shen and Chen 2007), averaged to form an index for behavioral intentions to recycle phones and purchase the beverage. Perceived politeness was measured using two-item, 7-point semantic differentials: “The ad message above was . . .” with choices including *Impolite/Polite* (1) to *Disrespectful/Respectful* (7). We used the same scales from Study 2 to measure message assertiveness and perceived threat to freedom. A bilingual translator first translated the English versions of the ads into Korean; a second bilingual translator back-translated the Korean ads into English; and a third bilingual translator modified the final versions.

Results

The assertiveness manipulation was successful: Participants who viewed the assertive ads ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 3.99$) perceived the ad messages to be more assertive than did participants who viewed the nonassertive ads ($M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 2.49$; $t(231) = 6.48$, $p < .01$).

To examine whether nationality and message assertiveness (the independent variables) affect both dependent variables—intentions to recycle old mobile phones and to purchase a V8 beverage—a 2 \times 2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted on the two intention measures and revealed a significant interaction (Wilks’s lambda $F(2, 228) = 3.15$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$). To better understand the nature of the multivariate interaction, we ran two separate two-way ANOVAs for each dependent variable.

As Figure 4 shows, for the environmental ad, nationality had a significant two-way interaction with message assertiveness ($F(1, 229) = 6.00$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$). American participants showed weaker intentions to recycle old mobile phones ($t(115) = 4.61$, $p < .01$) when they saw the assertive ad ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.68$) in contrast with the nonassertive ad ($M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 5.86$), but South Korean participants reacted the same to both appeals ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.32$, $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 4.47$; $t(114) = .46$, $p = \text{n.s.}$).

For the commercial ad, although the overall direction of the means seemed somewhat similar to that of the environmental ad, the two-way interaction between nationality and message assertiveness was not significant ($F(1, 229) = 1.40$, $p = \text{n.s.}$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$). American participants’ intentions to purchase the V8 beverage remained the same across the assertive ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 3.71$) and nonassertive conditions ($M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 4.15$; $t(115) = 1.46$, $p = \text{n.s.}$). South Korean participants showed the same pattern of results ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 3.96$, $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 3.90$; $t(114) = .20$, $p = \text{n.s.}$).

Taken together, the MANOVA and ANOVA results showed that the environmental ad caused nationality to interact more strongly with message assertiveness, whereas the commercial ad attenuated or erased the effect.

Test of Mediations

In Study 3, we tested whether the impact of message assertiveness was driven by perceived threat to freedom to

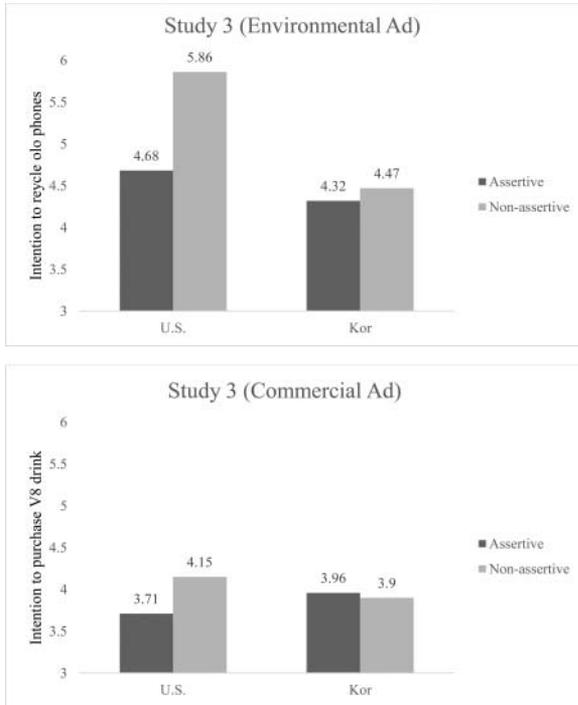


FIG. 4. Comparison of nationality \times message assertiveness interaction effect between the environmental ad and the commercial ad.

negatively anticipate perceived politeness, which in turn leads to increased recycling intentions toward old mobile phones (message assertiveness \rightarrow perceived threat to freedom \rightarrow perceived politeness \rightarrow recycling intentions). We proceeded with a multiple-step mediation analysis using Model 6 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2013) with 5,000 resamples to estimate the significance of indirect effect. This approach had bootstrapping procedures to generate a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval [CI] of the indirect effect (Preacher and Hayes 2008).

Under the U.S. environmental ad context condition, our results showed that message assertiveness (1 = assertive message and 0 = nonassertive message) increased perceived threat to freedom ($B = 1.15$, $SE = .22$; $p < .001$), which decreased perceived politeness ($B = -.17$, $SE = .08$; $p < .05$), which in turn increased recycling intentions ($B = .71$, $SE = .11$; $p < .001$). There was also a significant direct effect of message assertiveness on recycling intentions ($B = -1.18$, $SE = .26$; $p < .001$), whereas the effect of message assertiveness was lessened when the mediators were included in the model ($B = -.71$, $SE = .25$, $p < .01$). More specifically, the indirect effect of message assertiveness through perceived threat to freedom and perceived politeness was statistically significant ($B = -.14$, $SE = .08$; 95% CI from $-.34$ to $-.01$), as was the indirect effect through perceived politeness ($B = -.45$, $SE = .17$; 95% CI from $-.83$ to $-.15$). However, the indirect effect through perceived threat to freedom became nonsignificant ($B = .11$, $SE = .11$; 95% CI from $-.09$ to $.37$; see Figure 5). These findings support hypothesis 2b.

As an additional check, we performed the same analysis with the mediators in reverse order (perceived politeness \rightarrow perceived threat to freedom). We found that the indirect effect was not statistically significant when the mediators were reversed ($B = .02$, $SE = .02$; 95% CI from $-.01$ to $.09$).

Aside from the environmental ad exposure condition, Americans who viewed the commercial ad did not show the mediation pattern. Given that message assertiveness no longer significantly affected purchase intentions in the mediation model ($B = -.26$, $SE = .31$, $p = n.s.$), one of the conditions necessary to test for mediation was not satisfied (Baron and Kenny 1986; Preacher and Hayes 2008). Moreover, as expected, for South Koreans who viewed either the environmental or commercial ad, message assertiveness had a nonsignificant effect on behavioral intentions (recycling intentions, $B = -.14$, $SE = .28$, $p = n.s.$; purchase intentions, $B = .05$, $SE = .27$, $p = n.s.$). Thus, a further examination of mediations for South Koreans would be irrelevant.

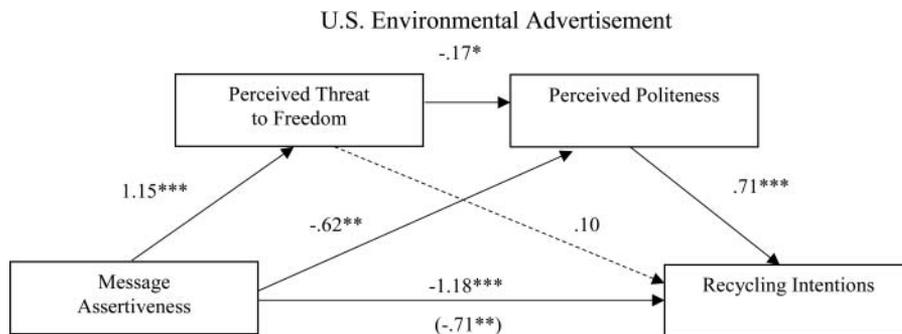


FIG. 5. Perceived threat to freedom and perceived politeness as mediators in determining effects of message assertiveness on Americans' recycling intentions. *Note.* A multiple-step mediation analysis with 5,000 bootstrap samples was performed with Model 6 in the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2013); the indirect effect through perceived threat to freedom was not significant ($B = .11$, $SE = .11$; 95% CI from $-.09$ to $.37$); the indirect effect through perceived threat to freedom and perceived politeness was significant ($B = -.14$, $SE = .08$; 95% CI from $-.34$ to $-.01$); the indirect effect through perceived politeness was significant ($B = -.45$, $SE = .17$; 95% CI from $-.83$ to $-.15$); $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

Discussion

Replicating the findings from Studies 1 and 2 in a realistic online magazine setting, Study 3 shows that Americans are less persuaded by assertive ad messages, but South Koreans are equally persuaded by assertive and nonassertive ad messages. The results also suggest that the cross-cultural differences are more likely to emerge when the advertising message promotes environmental behaviors rather than commercial behaviors.

In Study 2, we introduce the first mediator, the threat to freedom. In Study 3 we introduce and identify a second mediator—perceived (im)politeness—for causing reactance responses to assertiveness. We show that assertive advertising messages evoke American perceptions of threats to their freedom to choose whether they want to recycle old mobile phones. They then perceive that the ad message is impolite and show reactive behavioral intentions toward the recommended environmental behavior. In contrast, assertive and nonassertive messages do not significantly differ in South Korean intentions to pursue environmentally friendly behaviors.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The three studies we report in this article support our hypothesis that nonassertive messages are more persuasive for Americans, but South Koreans find both assertive and nonassertive messages to be equally persuasive. Social marketing campaigns tend to use assertive slogans (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012b). Consequently, we use three advertising campaigns advocating environmental responsibility. In Study 1, we devise a fictitious advertisement promoting recycling; in Study 2, we devise an ad encouraging energy saving; in Study 3, we present a mobile phone recycling ad embedded in an online magazine, along with other filler ads and articles. In all three studies, we consistently find that American participants respond more negatively to ads using an assertive tone than to the same messages using a nonassertive tone. In contrast, message tone does not have the same effects on South Korean participants. Furthermore, our mediational analysis reveals that Americans respond with reactance because they (a) feel threats to their autonomous freedom and, consequently, (b) perceive the ad message to be impolite. In addition, we find that for-profit commercial advertisements are less likely to evoke the cross-cultural differences. In Study 3, our commercial advertisement failed to prompt the reactance effect, which apparently conflicts with Weiner and Brehm's (1996) findings regarding for-profit advertisements. Consequently, our findings seem to reflect growing skepticism toward assertive commercial messages. We speculate that contemporary Americans may be more willing to accept or ignore assertive commercial messages, perhaps because American norms have changed, and assertive commercial messages no longer evoke threats to freedom. As a result, Americans may perceive that assertive

advertising messages are “normal” and that compliance is not mandatory. We suggest that future research should consider whether changing norms have altered American perceptions, with consequent effects on reactions to advertising messages.

Our research partially replicates two separate lines of research by Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu (2012a, 2012b) in which they identified two moderators of message assertiveness. First, they showed that consumption type moderates the effectiveness of assertive messages: Assertive language is less effective in marketing communications for utilitarian consumption but more effective for hedonic consumption (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012a). They also showed that issue importance moderates the effectiveness of assertive messages: Assertive language is less effective in social marketing campaigns advocating issues that are less important to the audience, but more effective for issues the audience values (Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu 2012b). We did not experimentally control for those two factors in our studies, although consumption type and issue importance might have influenced the results. However, the moderators are unlikely to have systematically changed our results, because recycling and energy saving are a type of utilitarian consumption. Also, both South Korea and the United States apparently see equal importance in environmental issues: The 2014 Environmental Performance Index (EPI) ranks the United States 33rd (67.52 points) and South Korea 43rd (63.79 points) among 178 ranked countries. Future research might consider how the three moderators—culture, consumption type, and issue importance—interact to influence the effectiveness of assertive messages.

Therefore, our findings resonate with Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu's (2012b) proposition that environmental agencies should use less-assertive language when targeting less-concerned consumers, but their recommendation holds true only if the message targets consumers from an individualistic culture. Our findings suggest that collectivistic cultures differ from individualistic cultures in the way people perceive and react to assertive messages.

We conducted this research in the United States and South Korea. Consequently, the cultural differences we report may generalize to other populations falling at different points of the individual–collectivism dimension. Western Europeans are known to be individualistic, so they might be similar to Americans in responding negatively to assertive messages. South Americans are known to be collectivistic, so they might be more like South Koreans in being more receptive to assertive messages.

Some caveats must be noted. We operationalize cultures as two nations, South Korea and the United States, from two ends of the cultural spectrum. However, our results are open to several confounding factors that usually accompany cross-cultural differences. First, Americans may show higher within-nation cultural variability because the United States is widely known as a melting pot of many cultures, whereas South Korea is historically an ethnically homogenous nation.

Second, the recent global spread of K-pop and South Korean entertainment known as the Korean Wave might have diluted culture-specific behaviors, particularly among South Korean millennials. Third, it is possible, yet unlikely, that our results might be attributed to other uncontrolled variables, such as social structure and/or social norms. For example, American university students might have more widely available social norms for free choice. Fourth, we used student samples from the United States and South Korea to test the hypotheses. Although students are a commonly targeted audience for environmental advertising, their homogeneity as students might limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should randomly sample a wider consumer base.

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APPENDIX 1

STIMULUS AD: ASSERTIVE RECYCLING AD (ENGLISH VERSION)

RECYCLE WHAT YOU CAN!

Recycling not only saves the environment, but also reduces landfill waste. It involves collecting, sorting and processing waste material and remanufacturing them into new products.

- You **have to recycle** plastic container, paper, cardboard, aluminum and steel cans.
- You **should definitely recycle more actively** to conserve natural resources, such as water, timber, and minerals.
- You **must recycle as much as possible** to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global climate change
- **All you have to do is to place the clean and dry material loose** into the recycling bin. In addition, **you ought to remove lids and caps** from containers when you recycle.

**THERE IS REALLY NO CHOICE!
DO SOMETHING TO RECYCLE!**



APPENDIX 2

STIMULUS AD: ASSERTIVE ENERGY-SAVING AD (ENGLISH VERSION)



SAVE ENERGY

- You **must** reduce overall energy consumption at home, school, and work.
- You **must** replace incandescent light bulbs with ENERGY STAR qualified compact fluorescent light bulbs.
- You **must** turn off lights when you leave a room.
- You **should** unplug your electronics to save energy.

To find out more about energy efficiency information, call 1-800-255-1111

APPENDIX 3

STIMULUS AD: ASSERTIVE RECYCLING AD (ENGLISH VERSION)

REASONS WHY

YOU SHOULD RECYCLE

YOUR OLD MOBILE

ACCESSORIES

CIRCUITS

BATTERIES

PLASTICS

THE STUFF WE EXTRACT

SOME OF THE THINGS THAT ARE MADE FROM RECOVERED RESOURCES

COPPER + CADMIUM AND NICKEL

PRECIOUS METALS

PLASTICS

STAINLESS STEEL

PLASTIC FENCE POSTS

BATTERIES

Part of our promise to you is ensuring that no mobile is sold for reuse. Each and every one we receive is dismantled and recycled, and any data left on the handset is destroyed.

More than 90% of the materials in a mobile phone can be recovered. • Recycling 50,000 handsets can replace the need to mine 110 tonnes of gold ore, 123 tonnes of silver bearing ore or 11 tonnes of copper sulphide ore.

More info mobilemuster.com.

None of the mobiles, chargers or accessories collected are sold for reuse.

mobilemuster
PRODUCT RECOVERY PROGRAM
KEEPING OLD MOBILES OUT OF LANDFILL

APPENDIX 4

STIMULUS AD: ASSERTIVE COMMERCIAL AD (ENGLISH VERSION)



V8
LOW SODIUM
Spicy Hot
100% Vegetable Juice
2 SERVINGS OF VEGETABLES

YOU SHOULD FUEL YOUR DAY WITH EIGHT ESSENTIAL VEGETABLES.

V8 Spicy Hot Low Sodium v8 juice provides you with 2 servings of vegetables in every nutritious 8-ounce glass with 70% less sodium than Spicy Hot V8 juice. Plus, it has that zesty kick your taste buds crave. It's also an excellent source of potassium, which helps maintain fluid balance and normal heart rhythm.

visit www.v8juice.com  