

**A Cross-National Comparative Study between Australia and Singapore:  
Attitudes towards Television Advertising**

**Ian Phau**

**Curtin University of Technology, Australia**

**Abstract**

This paper aims to compare the attitudes of consumers in Australia and Singapore towards TV advertising through the replication of a study by Witkowski and Kellner (1998) conducted in Germany and America. Specifically, it investigates the possible converging or diverging television attitudes between Australia and Singapore. Further, it expands the previous study by studying the frequency of switching channels during advertising breaks. Data were collected from 192 Australian and 197 Singaporean respondents and were analysed. Some implications for marketers and advertisers are also discussed.

**Introduction**

Previous studies have shown that commercials that do not cause a great deal of arousal in the viewer actually produce more favourable opinions (Leone & D'Arienzo 2001). Other factors such as the length of a commercial break and the commercial's positioning during the commercial break also affects consumers' reaction towards the advertisement. It is found that a 10% increase in advertisement awareness was recorded during shorter commercial breaks and an 18% increase when the advertisements were positioned towards the end of a commercial break (2004). Due to the immensity of advertising clutter,

advertisers use emotion-evoking TV advertisements to persuade viewers to have an enhanced positive reaction to the advertisement (Moore & Harris 1996).

Advertisers in Australia have attempted to determine what factors associated with people liking or disliking specific advertisements, however findings have been quite inconclusive. One particular study showed that TV programs that create favourable moods in the viewer are more than often carried over onto advertisements, causing similar favourable moods and attitudes to be translated onto the advertisements (Norris & Coleman 1993). However, later studies did not yield the same results for the sample of participants in Australia (Norris & Coleman 1994). The authors attributed the contradictory effects on memory to an involving program may create a positive mood and attitude which carries over to the advertisements. At the same time, an involving program may also absorb much of the viewers' attention and thereby interfere with memory encoding of the competing stimuli within the advertisements. Findings from Singapore do show that TV advertisements can work to provide favourable consumer reaction and recall. One such example was a Singapore Airlines advertisement for a new fragrance on all Singapore Airlines. In surveys, citizens in Singapore who had seen the advertisements and actually experienced the fragrance on the airline did report very enjoyable memories (Lindstrom 2005).

Consumers in Singapore and Australia have also been exposed to different levels of advertising culture. There was a time when Singapore was against Western TV advertising. The reasoning behind this was the notion of diluting the Asian culture and bringing in undesirable affects, particularly the "American Cultural Imperialism". The fear is that the cultural values of Singapore, which are taken very seriously, will be replaced by values

that are not approved by the government of Singapore, as well as many of its more conservative inhabitants (Bignell 2004). Hence the execution of TV advertising often has to take into consideration the cultural influences that are strongly embedded in the Singapore society so as not to “offend” Singaporean TV commercials viewers. In an attempt to groom Singapore to be a morally good and corrupt-free society, TV advertisements were used to instil such values Gidley & Inayatullah (2002). On the other hand, in Australia, the notion of a corrupt-free culture being brought in by TV advertisements is not as strong as it is in Singapore. However, the notion that TV advertisements can affect the culture of the country is certainly not something that is ignored. In fact, it is something that some in Australia take very seriously (Cunningham & Turner 2000). With advertisers spending almost AUD\$2.5 billion annually on TV commercials in Australia (Garland et al. 2002), it is clear that TV commercials plays a huge role in depicting and influencing Australia’s culture. For example, studies have shown that Australian youth actually find cigarette advertisements on television quite enjoyable (Gunter 1990).

However, Singapore and Australia share the similarity of being a multicultural society where different race and religion are respected and tolerated; a consideration essential for advertisers in both countries. Singapore and Australia also have the commonality of Western influence, in particular the influence of the British. Singapore was once under the British colonial rule and till today is still adopting the British education system (Kau & Yang 1992). Similarly, Australia was also once a British colony and till date, it is still part of the Commonwealth of the United Kingdom. Even though the Australian education system had been independent of the British, it is still largely rooted to that of the British

system (Pecotich & Shultz II 1998). With the validation of globalisation and such common grounds between the two countries, consumers' attitudes are likely to be at convergence.

The debate about attitudes towards TV advertisements also seems to be generally similar throughout the world. These are arguments that have occurred in other places, and with repeated occurrences in many places depending on what is happening in a particular country or time period. However, it is interesting to note that in a strict country like Singapore, even the importance and impact of TV advertising is not forgotten by the government. The use of TV advertising is not just to prevent something harmful such as smoking but instead, it is also used as a medium to convey cultural values through advertising messages while shaping consumers' brand or product choices.

This research replicates the initial study by Witkowski and Kellner (1998) conducted in Germany and America; and is set to determine the similarities and differences in attitudes and behaviour towards TV advertising between Australia and Singapore. Further, it expands the previous study by studying the frequency of switching channels during advertising breaks.

### **Research Methodology and Instrument**

A convenience sampling method is used in this study. University students of the two countries (i.e. Australia and Singapore) participated in this research through a self-administrated survey. As this paper replicates the earlier study conducted by Witkowski and Kellner (1998), the survey instrument developed is primarily based on their initial questionnaire. The questionnaire comprises of seven sections opening with asking

respondents about the average number of hours of daily TV viewing. Respondents were then asked about their level of agreement on the “Perceived Content of TV Advertising” based on the similar 20-statements developed by Witkowski and Kellner (1998). In the third section, respondents were asked about their “Perception of Product Group and Brand Advertising” and were asked to check product groups that they considered who used bad or boring TV commercials. Despite similarly having 16 different product groups, some of the product groups differ slightly from Witkowski and Kellner’s (1998) questionnaire to cater specifically to the Australian and Singaporean consumers. A 12-item scale developed by Dix (2006) was used to ask respondents about their frequency of switching channels during advertisements. This section is added as a new inclusion to Witkowski and Kellner’s (1998) survey, as this paper also intends to examine if there is any differences in attitudes towards TV advertising between the two countries in terms of their channel switching tendencies during TV commercials. A 7-point Likert scale with (1) being “Never” to (7) being “Always” were used to administer this section. In the subsequent sections, respondents were asked to list various TV commercials that they liked or disliked most in an open-ended format, and how they would change TV commercials based on a 4-item scale. General demographic questions such as gender, age, marital status and occupation were also asked.

### *Sample*

Of the 235 questionnaires distributed in Singapore, only 197 questionnaires were deemed usable. The remaining were discarded due to non-response, inconsistency and ambiguity responses.

The response rate in Australia is slightly lower with 80.8%. Out of the 250 questionnaires distributed to the university students, only 192 were deemed usable for the study.

## **Findings**

### ***Sample***

There are 47.4% male and 52.6% female Australian respondents and 41.6% male and 58.4% female Singaporean respondents. A majority of the respondents in both countries are between the age of 18-34 years old (97.9% in Australia and 96.4% in Singapore). A large number of respondents are also single with 90.1% in Australia and 92.2% in Singapore. The daily TV viewing patterns of the respondents in both countries are very alike. The majority of the respondents watch less than three hours of television a day, with 84.5% viewing in Australia and 85.8% in Singapore. The results gathered reflect converging characteristics with very similar average daily television viewing hours and patterns.

### ***Perception of TV advertising content***

A T-test of mean scores reflects that there is a significant difference between the Australians and Singaporeans' perceived perception of TV advertising's content for eight out of the twenty item scale (See *Table 1*).

**Table 1 – Perception of TV advertising content between AUS and SIN**

<b>Statement / Item</b>	<b>AUS</b>	<b>SIN</b>	<b>T-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
a. I like commercials that are hip and imaginative	2.12	1.98	.087	.164
b. I get many good shopping ideas through TV commercials.	3.16	2.93	.000	.023*

c. Housewives are normally portrayed as negative in TV commercials.	3.33	3.33	.840	.985
d. There is nothing more boring than TV commercials.	3.12	3.39	.000	.013*
e. I hardly take note of TV commercials when I watch TV.	3.05	3.26	.069	.066
f. Men in TV commercials are normally portrayed as dumb.	3.19	3.52	.314	.000*
g. Men in TV commercials are normally portrayed as macho.	2.75	2.93	.437	.050*
h. TV commercials always show a wholesome world.	3.44	2.52	.027	.076
i. TV commercials have little to do with my daily life.	2.61	3.30	.009	.000*
j. What I miss most in TV is real, valid information.	2.84	2.69	.246	.128
k. There is not enough humour in TV commercials.	2.88	2.78	.369	.356
l. Commercials only make products more expensive.	3.11	2.81	.817	.004*
m. TV commercials lecture too much.	3.33	3.15	.000	.046*
n. Women are mostly shown in TV commercials as sex symbols.	2.34	2.61	.037	.008*
o. Extraordinary creative ideas are rare in TV commercials.	2.54	2.53	.930	.914
p. I object to TV commercials that use scare tactics.	2.93	2.98	.224	.625
q. TV commercials should be more realistic.	2.79	2.79	.007	.939
r. A straightforward informative commercial bores me.	2.21	2.50	.652	.268
s. TV commercials often inspire me to buy products.	3.08	2.80	.083	.514
t. Most products don't keep their promises made in TV commercials.	2.54	2.87	.002	.277

1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree and 5 = strongly disagree.

\* p-value <0.05

### ***Consumers' Perception of Product Categories***

Each respondent was asked to check those product categories that they thought to use bad or boring TV commercials from a list of 16 various kinds of product categories (modified and adapted from Witkowski and Kellner 1998). *Table 2* presents the top 10 product categories that were ranked most negatively (i.e. boring and bad TV commercial) for the

two countries. Within the top 10 product categories, nine have been identified as being negative for both countries. Out of the 10 stated, only one product category differs between the two countries (“baby products” for Australia and “electronics” for Singapore).

A comparison among all the various product categories that have been similarly identified by both countries do not differ greatly in terms of percentage (e.g. detergent – 56.8% in Australia and 53.8% in Singapore, grocery – 45.3% in Australia and 40.1% in Singapore, and restaurants – 28.1% in Australia and 33.0% in Singapore). Such similarity may be attributed to the effects of globalisation where many internationally established brands and products have similar advertising concepts or even advertising execution in both countries.

The only significant difference of any product categories selected in term of percentage would be “political spots”. Australia showing a high 71.4% while Singapore only reflects a 42.1%. However this may be explained by the limited exposure of political-related advertisements in Singapore, as there are strong and conservative restrictions set out by the Singapore government on any political propaganda in advertising (Safire 1995).

**Table 2 - Top 10 Product Categories Commercials Ranked Most Negatively (Ranking and Percentage of Respondents Who Believe So)**

<b>Australia</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Singapore</b>	<b>%</b>
Political spots*	71.4	Detergents*	53.8
Home ware*	59.4	Home ware*	44.7
Detergents*	56.8	Political spots*	42.1
Banking and finance*	54.2	Education*	41.1
Pharmaceuticals*	49.0	Grocery*	40.1
Education*	49.0	Pharmaceuticals*	34.5
Grocery*	45.3	Restaurants*	33.0
Toiletries*	37.5	Banking and finance*	32.0

Restaurants*	28.1	Toiletries*	24.9
Baby products	23.4	Electronics	24.4

\* 9 of the product categories that are identical for both countries among the top 10 negatively rated product group commercials.

### ***Likeability of Advertisements***

Respondents were asked to list any five TV commercials that they liked or disliked in an open-ended response format. Based on the results collected, the Australian respondents appear to be more critical as compared to the Singapore respondents. Despite a slightly smaller sample size, the Australians responded more frequently, listing a greater number of campaigns that they liked and disliked. A total number of 398 liked campaigns and 462 disliked campaigns were listed by the Australian respondents while only 298 liked campaigns and 355 disliked campaigns were recorded by the Singaporean respondents. These results also reveal that respondents tend to be able to recall more disliked than liked advertising campaigns in terms of the number of advertisements listed as well as the percentage of liked and disliked advertisements mentioned (as shown in *Table 3*). This interesting finding applies to both countries of respondents (e.g. Australia’s most “liked” – 29% vs. “disliked” – 33% and Singapore’s most “liked” – 12% vs. “disliked” – 15%).

**Table 3 – Top 5 Most Liked and Disliked Campaigns**

AUS		SIN	
<b>Most liked Campaigns (times mentioned/percent of sample)</b>			
Carlton Draught	56 / 29%	Heineken	23 / 12%
Hahn Light	39 / 20%	Peugeot	19 / 10%
McDonalds	31 / 16%	Tiger beer	16 / 8%
Honda	24 / 13%	Nokia	14 / 7%
Nike	16 / 8%	McDonalds	11 / 6%
<b>Most disliked Campaigns (times mentioned/percent of sample)</b>			
Rugs a million	64 / 33%	Dynamo Detergent	29 / 15%
Thrust	52 / 27%	KFC	22 / 11%
WA Salvage	49 / 26%	Kushin-bo Restaurant	19 / 10%

Arrow Computers	42 / 22%	OSIM	14 / 7%
Good guys	35 / 18%	SK II	9 / 5%

Table 3 shows the top five most liked and disliked campaigns for both groups. It is observed that only McDonalds appeared on both most liked lists of Australia and Singapore. Also from the results gathered, two additional interesting findings may be concluded. Firstly, respondents from both countries have revealed beer advertisements to be among their most liked campaigns, Carlton Draught (29%) and Hahn Light (20%) were recorded in Australia and Heineken (12%) and Tiger beer (8%) were recorded in Singapore. The likeability of these beer advertisements may be attributed to one similar factor that these advertisements are conceptualised on the basis of “fun, humour and light-heartedness”.

The second interesting finding from these results is that most of the disliked advertisements in both countries tend to be using “catchy” jingles and gimmicks, repetitive phrases, “cheesy” taglines and celebrities or spokesperson that are deemed “annoying”. As a result, these advertisements have instead caused negative affects on respondents, causing them to recall the advertisements as being irritating and unpleasant.

***Tendency and Frequency of Channel Switching During TV Advertisements***

This study has included an additional section to identify channel switching tendencies and frequencies (see Table 4). Respondents from both countries have rated all of the 12 items on a higher score. These findings may indicate that both countries’ respondents are prone to switching channels whenever a TV commercial comes on. T-tests have shown that there were no significant differences between Australia and Singapore respondents for all items.

This further accentuates that respondents from both countries have similar converging attitudes towards switching channels during commercial breaks (i.e. high tendency and frequency of switching to another channel whenever advertisements are shown).

**Table 4 – Tendency and Frequency of Channel Switching (Zapping of TV Commercials)**

	AUS	SIN	T-value	p-value
I switch whenever an advertising break comes on	4.60	4.47	.256	.823
I switch only if an irritating ad comes on	5.40	5.27	.693	.391
I switch if an ad comes on that has been repeated too often	5.62	5.69	.307	.652
I switch if an ad comes on that I have seen very recently	4.68	4.69	.326	.931
I switch if I dislike the commercial	5.73	5.57	.447	.309
I switch because there are too many ads on television these days	4.68	4.75	.010	.670
I switch to see what else is on other channels	5.88	5.82	.614	.661
I switch out of habit	4.57	4.27	.289	.068
I switch because the ads disrupt the program that I am watching	4.72	4.51	.010	.199
I switch so that I can watch two programs at the same time	4.73	4.44	.773	.110
I switch when I have the remote control within my reach	4.83	4.74	.980	.606
I switch when a product is advertised that has nothing to do with me	4.79	4.84	.845	.741

1 = “Never” to 7 = “Always”

\* p-value <0.05

### ***Improving TV Commercials***

In an attempt to understand the directions of how respondents would like to improve TV commercials, four statements were asked and the results are reflected in *Table 5*.

**Table 5 - Improving TV Commercials**

<b>Proposal</b>	<b>AUS</b>	<b>SIN</b>	<b>T-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
I would use more wit and humour in TV commercials.	2.06	2.04	.616	.873
I would make TV commercials more informative.	2.85	2.59	.597	.008*
I would make TV commercials more provocative.	2.82	2.57	.495	.008*
I would also mention the product's disadvantages.	3.69	3.34	.143	.003*

5-point Likert scale - Desired amount of change ranging from 1 = great deal of change and 5 = no change at all

\* p-value <0.05

The mean scores for “Improving TV Commercials” between Australia and Singapore as presented in *Table 5* show that other than proposing “the use of more wit and humour in TV commercials” with no significant difference, the rest of the items were significantly different between the two countries. Based on the mean scores provided, both Australia and Singapore have also shown the strongest desire to propose the use of “more wit and humour” in TV commercials. These results are found to be similar to Witkowski and Kellner’s (1998) study.

## **Discussion**

The findings have provided some useful insights to understanding Australian and Singaporean’s attitudes towards TV advertising. Evidently, similar characteristics and attitudes suggest overall convergence in both countries’ attitudes. There were also some differing and contrasting findings that displayed diverging attitudes in certain perspectives. Both countries have astonishing similarities for product categories that they have listed as being “bad or boring” which suggests converging attitudes towards TV advertising. Given the 16 product categories available for their selection, nine out of the ten most negatively-rated product categories are reported to be similar for both countries. Such indication of converging attitudes may be attributed to the effects of globalisation where many

internationally established brands and products have adopted a standardised approach in their marketing and advertising campaigns to ensure general relevance across borders. For example, in product categories such as toiletries (where both Australia and Singapore have rated them negatively with 37.5% and 24.9% respectively), international companies in this industry such as Colgate-Palmolive and Procter and Gamble (P&G) carry out similar advertising concepts and executions for their product brands such as Colgate toothpaste, Palmolive shower gel, Oral-B toothbrush and Gillette shaver in both countries.

With respect to the two countries' liked and disliked advertising campaigns, both interesting and converging results were found. While beer advertisements are both countries' most well-liked commercials, both countries also tend to recall "disliked" advertisements better than their liked advertisements. Convergence phenomena of more likely to switch channels during advertisement breaks were also reflected in the study. When it comes to improving TV commercials, both countries share the same desire of improving commercials based on the use of "wit and humour". Such desire to improve advertisements was also reflected by the Germans and the Americans in Witkowski and Kellner's (1998) study. These similar findings in the four countries may suggest a call for further replicating studies to be conducted to validate the possibility of identifying a converging global phenomenon. This may provide marketers and advertisers with valuable information on developing future advertising and promotional concepts.

Despite the substantial evidence of converging attitudes, the Australian diverges from the Singaporeans in the other methods of improving advertisements. Overall, in terms of respondents' participation, the greater willingness on the part of the Australians to list the

advertising campaigns they liked and disliked might suggest that they are more willing participants. However, there may be various reasons to explain the higher listing from the Australians as compared to the lower listings by the Singaporeans. Firstly, it could be that the Australian respondents are paying more attention to or that they have a better recall of commercials than do the Singaporeans. Secondly, it could also be possible that cultural implications arise whereby Australians tend to be more openly critical than the Singaporeans (Hofstede 1984). Lastly, similar to Witkowski and Kellner's (1998) discussion where the authors suggested that Germans are more critical is a result of their education background, it is also valid to argue that the Australian education system also encourages more critical thinking and outspokenness.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has provided some contributions into the knowledge of cross-cultural similarities and differences that were initially discussed by Witkowski and Kellner's (1998). Based on the evidence of converging attitudes between Australia and Singapore, useful managerial implications may be drawn. Marketers and advertisers can better decide their methodology or approach of executing their advertising campaigns.

For local and international businesses intending to expand into the two countries, this paper can be a platform to the development or modification of TV advertising campaigns that may help to achieve consumers' positive recall. For example, Australian companies such as Cadbury chocolate who have established their business in many countries including Singapore may like to build their TV campaigns fundamentally around the basis of being humorous and interesting. Likewise, Singaporean companies like Singapore

Airlines who wish to maintain its presence in the Australian market would certainly not want to engage in any advertisements that uses irritating jingles or unpopular celebrities.

There are some potential limitations to this study. For instance, because a relatively small sample size was used (192 respondents from Australia and 197 from Singapore) to conduct this study, the results tabulated cannot be a representation of both countries as a whole. Particularly for Australia, the sample was collected in Western Australia, which is the less populous state. Hence it does not form an overall representation of the whole country. In addition, the sample was being administered in a University setting. Therefore most of the respondents are single, students and aged 24 and under.

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