Advertising persuasion may differ based on different languages and/or dialects. From a linguistic perspective, different dialects and accents provide clues for a receiver with respect to a variety of information about the characteristics of a speaker (DeShields & Kara, 2011). Research reveals that spokespersons who speak a standard accent can evoke more favorable judgments on competence and status dimensions than those who speak with a non-standard accent or dialect accent (DeShields, Oscar, & Kara, 1996; Edwards, 1982). In comparison to a standard accent, the literature provides a limited number of studies that have addressed the effects of local accent on an ad’s persuasion. For example, Bell (1984) argued that a product for distinct regional consumers can adopt different advertising by including a different local accent. Though these prior studies provide some insights on why different accents generate different advertising persuasiveness, there are few studies within a Chinese context and it remains unclear how this advertising strategy works within a Chinese context.

China is a vast and complex market, and it is also a multi-dialect region. Thus, it is important to know how accents/dialects (such as Mandarin vs. Cantonese) affect the persuasiveness of an ad. In addition, accents provide clues for a receiver with respect to a variety of information about the characteristics of a speaker. (DeShields & Kara, 2011). Research reveals that spokespersons who speak a standard accent can evoke more favorable judgments on competence and status dimensions than those who speak with a non-standard accent or dialect accent (DeShields, Oscar, & Kara, 1996; Edwards, 1982).

In this study, we experimentally test how a spokesperson’s accents (standard Mandarin accent and local Cantonese accent) influence advertising persuasion across different product involvements (high- or low-involvement products) and different advertising appeals (rational or emotional ads). The results show that ads promoting high (low)-involvement products will produce higher persuasion when the ads use Mandarin (Cantonese) rather than Cantonese (Mandarin). In addition, ads with rational (emotional) appeals will result in higher persuasion when presented in Mandarin (Cantonese) rather than Cantonese (Mandarin). The findings contribute to a better understanding of an ad’s persuasion with respect to a spokesperson’s accents, and offer managerial implications for marketers doing advertising in a multilingual environment such as China.
According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Cacioppo, & Morris, 1983), consumer product involvement and ad appeals may also affect advertising persuasion as measured by credibility and likeability. Prior research demonstrates that in high product involvement situations, consumers depend more on the product-related information such as source credibility as the central route of persuasion (e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). The standard language may help enhance the source credibility because of its function to recollect and consistency of image (Luna et al., 2003; Lwin & Wee, 1999). Furthermore, rational appeals, which focus on consumers’ rational thinking and functional requirements of product or brand (Resnick & Stern, 1977), may have a positive interplay with the standard language in producing a higher level of advertising persuasion.

In summary, we propose a conceptual model that takes into account interplays of spokesperson’s accent, product involvement, and ad appeals in producing advertising persuasion in the Chinese context, as shown in Fig. 1.

3. Study 1

3.1. Hypotheses for Study 1

Prior research has consistently shown that the influences of message source characteristics on consumer attitudes and behaviors depend on the consumers’ level of message processing motivation—that is, degree of involvement (Gorn, 1982). When consumers’ product involvement is high, they tend to focus on central product cues such as information credibility in making buying decisions (e.g., Arora, Stoner, & Arora, 2006; Yilmaz, Telci, Bodur, & Iscioglu, 2011). One vocal factor that affects the spokesperson’s credibility is accent (Lwin & Wee, 1999). A match between a spokesperson with a standard accent and a product is likely to lead to the perception that the spokesperson knows the product (Lalwani, Lwin, & Li, 2005). The congruency is likely to enhance the perceived credibility of the spokesperson. For example, Standard Mandarin may function to create a “snob appeal” to convey a product’s prestigious image (Lalwani et al., 2005).

When consumers’ product involvement is low, they may pay more attention to peripheral cues such as information likeability (Kahle & Homer, 1985). For example, advertisers may use colloquial language such as Cantonese to portray products used in everyday life, and child-lish language for products such as toys (Lalwani et al., 2005). Therefore, the study proposes that:

- **H1a.** Ads promoting high-involvement products are likely to result in more favorable brand attitudes when the ads use Mandarin rather than Cantonese.

- **H1b.** Ads promoting low-involvement products are likely to result in more favorable brand attitudes when the ads use Cantonese rather than Mandarin.

Similarly, high-involvement products tend to engender central processing, implying that consumers will exert the cognitive effort required to evaluate the issue-relevant arguments presented to them (Brown et al., 1985). Research reveals that commercials are more effective when viewed in high involvement programs, which in turn leads to an increase in memory (Luna & Peracchio, 2001; Singh, Rothschild, & Churchill, 1988). The standard accent may further facilitate processing and increase the likelihood that customers will remember the ad claims, because it is more congruent with high involvement products’ credibility (Lalwani et al., 2005).

On the other hand, ad persuasion also is a function of the listeners perceiving the speaker as similar to themselves in accent (Krapfel & Robert, 1988). Lalwani et al. (2005) find that for low-involvement purchase decisions, a spokesperson who uses a similar accent as the raters will evoke more favorable judgments of likeability than a spokesperson who uses a dissimilar accent. The local accent ads such as ads in Cantonese may function to build a relational closeness with the local customers in the absence of other facilitating cues, and thus they may be more likely to remember the ads. Therefore, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

- **H2a.** Ads promoting high-involvement products are likely to result in higher memory when the ads use Mandarin rather than Cantonese.

- **H2b.** Ads promoting low-involvement products are likely to result in higher memory when the ads use Cantonese rather than Mandarin.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Experimental design

A low-involvement product and a high-involvement product were used in the study, respectively. To identify the high-involvement product, four products were carefully selected from the existing literature (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985) and modified in order to be cohesive with the facets of involvement. It was also ensured that the products were relevant to the population at large, and to respondents of both genders. These four products include: computer, bicycle, battery and camera. The pre-test involved a convenience sample of 21 males and 20 females. Results indicated that the mean product involvement was the highest for computer (M = 4.72) and that there were no significant differences between male and female respondents in terms of their involvement (p > .42). Hence, computer was selected as the high-involvement product.

The conceptual model.

**Fig. 1.** The conceptual model.
to identify the low-involvement product, similarly four products were picked and tested: toothpaste, mineral water, biscuit and beer. The pre-test involved a convenience sample of 21 males and 20 females. Results indicated that the mean product involvement was the lowest for mineral water (M = 2.08) and that there were no significant differences between male and female respondents’ involvement (p > .48). So mineral water was selected as the low-involvement product. In the main experiment, participants were asked to rate the products on six, five-point disagree/agree items (Seungueun Lee, 2005).

The study controlled for subjects’ language proficiency and cultural identification to ensure validity. Macintyre, Noels, and Clement (1997) and Luna and Peracchio’s (2001) scales were used to evaluate the level of language proficiency of the participants (from grades 1 to 5) by asking them to use the language in different contexts (like reading, watching movies, writing letters). In this study, three aspects of language used in daily life (listening, speaking and writing) were selected and revised to evaluate the subjects’ language proficiency.

To evaluate the level of cultural identification, a scale coming from the research of Oetting and Beauvais (1991) and Lee (2006) was used. Two items which were related to self-assessment in the Oetting and Beauvais’s scale (orthogonal culture identification scale, OCIS) and three items about specific cultural identity in Lee’s (2006) scale were selected, which constitute the scale of cultural identification.

A 2 × 2 mixed factorial design was used in the study. Products (high involvement or low involvement), and accents (Mandarin or Cantonese) served as between-subject factors. Some 160 undergraduates and postgraduates drawn from a university in Guangzhou participated in Study 1: the participants had the chance to win a 20 gift certificate to a store of their choice. They were randomly assigned to the 4 conditions, with 40 participants in each condition. Participants were shown two radio ads of fictitious brands. The fictitious brand names were pretested to be similarly favorable. A hypothetical advertisement script that mimicked the actual advertisements on the local radio was created. The script was written in a way that was appropriate for advertising the products: mineral water and laptop. Finally, two artificial brands named “Youran mineral water” and “Kenix laptop” respectively were selected. There were two versions of the script for each brand, a Mandarin version and a Cantonese version. In this study, the Mandarin accent referred to the use of accurate Mandarin with correct and legitimate pronunciation. So the Mandarin advertisement script was written in such a way that it conformed to accurate grammatical structures. The Cantonese version of the script, with the primary meaning, was revised with simon-pure Cantonese words in order to highlight the unique characteristics of the Cantonese accent. The exact information is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

### 3.2. Procedure

In the study, each participant listened to the radio ads for just one product, either high involvement or low involvement, and one accent (Mandarin or Cantonese). The ads were counterbalanced to reduce order effects. After each ad, participants were asked for their attitudes towards the brand, followed by the manipulation check items. They were asked to rate the brand on seven-point semantic differential scales anchored by not appealing/very appealing, not interesting/very interesting, disagree/agree, and bad/good. As the Cronbach’s α scores were high (above .92), average scores were used where higher scores reflected more favorable attitudes.

After listening to the radio ads, the subjects were asked to perform the following memory task: (1) an unaided recall test for the descriptive sentences in the radio ads; (2) a recognition test for the brand names in the radio ads after the unaided recall task. In the unaided recall test, subjects were given 5 min to write down as many sentences as they could remember. After the unaided recall test, a 30-min long entertainment video was shown, and the participants were required to focus their attention on the content of the video. When the video ended, the recognition test followed. The subjects were asked to identify the brand name in the ad from a list of 10 brand names, 9 of which were distractors.

#### 3.3. Results

The study collected a total of 159 valid questionnaires (see Table 3 for sample descriptions).

To confirm that the product involvement levels of were as intended, a t test was conducted which showed a significant difference between the high and low involvement products, that is, the laptop was perceived to have higher involvement than the mineral water (M_{mineral water} = 4.70 versus M_{laptop} = 5.09, p < .01). According to the results of the t test, there are no differences in the language proficiency and the cultural identification between the Mandarin and Cantonese groups. All of the items’ p-values were above .15, which shows that there were no confounding effects from subjects’ language proficiency and the cultural identification.

H1a predicts that ads promoting high involvement products will result in more favorable brand attitudes when they are presented in Mandarin rather than Cantonese. As shown in Fig. 2, the results of one-way ANOVA tests indicate a significant main effect (M_{Mandarin} = 5.51 > M_{Cantonese} = 3.76, F(1,77) = 180.49, p < .01), which supports H1a. H1b predicts that ads promoting low involvement products will result in more favorable brand attitudes when they are presented in Cantonese rather than Mandarin. The results also show a significant main effect (M_{Mandarin} = 4.16 < M_{Cantonese} = 5.34, F(1,78) = 66.92, p < .01), supporting H1b.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mandarin version</th>
<th>Cantonese version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 生命力活泉保持需要各种天然矿物质加分。
生命力活泉，来自深山幽谷，为你补
充人体所需的钙、镁、磷等矿物质，使你的
每一天都有鲜活的感觉。 soberly.
|| 生命力活泉保持需要各种天然矿物质加分。
生命力活泉，来自深山幽谷，为你补
充人体所需的钙、镁、磷等矿物质，使你的
每一天都有鲜活的感觉。 soberly.
|

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising scripts of Kenix laptop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 你因为个性而与众不同，生活因多彩而美不胜收。
你因为个性而与众不同，生活因多彩而美不胜收。
| 物美价廉。
物美价廉。
| 你因为个性而与众不同，生活因多彩而美不胜收。
你因为个性而与众不同，生活因多彩而美不胜收。
| 你因为个性而与众不同，生活因多彩而美不胜收。
你因为个性而与众不同，生活因多彩而美不胜收。
|

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H2a predicts that ads promoting high involvement products will result in higher memory when the ads use Mandarin rather than Cantonese. The results indicate that the main effects are significant for both the unaided recall test ($M_{\text{Mandarin}} = 2.75 > M_{\text{Cantonese}} = 1.82$, $F(1,77) = 22.95$, $p < .01$, see Fig. 3) and the brand recognition rates ($P_{\text{Mandarin}} = 65.70\% > P_{\text{Cantonese}} = 46.15\%$, $\chi^2 = 3.67$, $p < .05$, see Fig. 4). Thus, H2a is supported.

H2b predicts that ads promoting low involvement products will result in higher memory when presented in Cantonese rather than Mandarin. The results also show that the main effects are significant for both unaided recall tests ($M_{\text{Mandarin}} = 2.38 > M_{\text{Cantonese}} = 2.98$, $F(1,78) = 12.63$, $p < .01$, see Fig. 3), and the brand recognition rates ($P_{\text{Mandarin}} = 37.50\% < P_{\text{Cantonese}} = 62.50\%$, $\chi^2 = 5.00$, $p < .05$, see Fig. 4), supporting H2b.

4. Study 2

4.1. Hypotheses for Study 2

Rational appeals inform consumers of one or more key benefits about the advertised product, whereas emotional appeals aim at evoking feelings or emotions in consumers (Nathalie & Patrick, 2010). Standard language itself possesses rational qualities, and the spokesperson with a standard accent gives an impression of having more reliability and credibility than a spokesperson with a local accent (Edwards, 1982; Hermann, 1978). Thus, in the ads with rational appeal, a spokesperson that adopts the standard accent would have a better rational evaluation.

However, Noriega and Blair’s (2008) study shows that since the local language more closely connects the bilingual speakers with their family and race, advertising with a local accent relates more with family, friends, home, and hometown associations, leading to a more positive attitude and higher purchase intention. Some scholars even claim that there is no need to use special emotional words, simply the local language and the implication of an appropriate consumption environment will enable the ad to be understood and memorized (Noriega & Blair, 2008). As a symbol and the carrier of the local culture, the local accent gives a sense of intimacy and familiarity. It creates a certain feeling of dependence and resonance, so the spokesperson with the local accent always works through emotional persuasion. Based on the above logics, the study offers the following hypotheses:

H3a. Ads with a rational appeal are likely to result in more favorable brand attitudes when the ads use Mandarin rather than Cantonese.

H3b. Ads with an emotional appeal are likely to result in more favorable brand attitudes when the ads use Cantonese rather than Mandarin.

This study also examines a psycholinguistic model of bilingual concept organization and extends it to the processing of advertisements by bilingual consumers. The Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM) suggests that second-language (L2) messages result in inferior memory as compared with first-language (L1) stimuli (Dufour & Kroll, 1995; Kroll & de Groot, 1997). These language asymmetries in memory occur because processing an L2 message at a conceptual level is less likely than processing an L1 message conceptually. As for the accent, the standard accent itself possesses rational qualities (Edwards, 1982; Hermann, 1978), while the local accent has emotional qualities (Noriega & Blair, 2008). According to RHM, as Luna and Peracchio (2001) discussed in their research, higher congruity levels may result in stronger linkages between an accent and an ads’ appeal, thus facilitating processing and increasing the likelihood that customers are more likely to remember the ad claims (Lippman & Morris, 1973). In other words, a high level of congruity between a standard accent and a rational appeal, and a high level of congruity of a local accent and an emotional appeal, both will increase consumer ad memory. Thus, the study offers the following hypotheses:

H4a. Ads with a rational appeal are likely to result in higher memory when the ads use Mandarin rather than Cantonese.

H4b. Ads with an emotional appeal are likely to result in higher memory when the ads use Cantonese rather than Mandarin.

4.2. Method

4.2.1. Experimental design

A $2 \times 2$ mixed factorial design was used. Ad appeals (emotional appeal vs. rational appeal) and accents (Mandarin vs. Cantonese) served...
as between-subjects factors. Another 160 undergraduates and postgraduates drawn from a university in Guangzhou for the chance to win a 20 gift certificate to a store of their choice participated in the study. They were shown one of the four radio ads of a fictitious brand (Youran mineral water). There were two appeals used in the radio ads, emotional appeal and rational appeal. Each appeal of the ads was equipped with two accents, Mandarin and Cantonese. Two hypothetical advertisement scripts that mimicked the actual advertisements on the local radio were drawn up (see Table 4).

The scripts were written in a way that was appropriate for advertising mineral water. For the classification criterion of appeals in advertising, this study adopted the suggestion of Yehoshua and Flint-Goor (1996). Accordingly, as for the two ads used in this study, one is highly rational, and the other is highly emotional.

### 4.2.2. Procedure

Subjects were randomly divided into four groups, with 40 subjects in each group. Each participant listened to the radio ads for just one type of the ad appeals and one accent. The ads were counterbalanced to reduce order effects. After hearing an ad, participants were asked for their attitudes towards the brand, followed by the manipulation check items.

The language proficiency and the cultural identification of the participants were also regarded as control variables. The same scales used in Study 1 were used to evaluate language proficiency and cultural identification.

Brand attitudes and ad memory were also used as the dependent variables. The same scale used in Study 1 was used to evaluate brand attitudes. Hereof the Cronbach’s α scores of brand attitudes were above .95, and thus the average scores were used. The memory task also consisted of an unaided recall test and a recognition test, and the test process was the same as in Study 1.

### 4.3. Results

In this study there were a total of 159 valid questionnaires (for sample description, see Table 5).

According to the results of a t test, there were no differences in the language proficiency and the cultural identification in the two groups: Mandarin and Cantonese. All items’ p-values were above .15, which shows that there were no confounding effects from subjects’ language proficiency and the cultural identification.

H3a predicts that with the rational appeal, Mandarin ads can result in more favorable brand attitudes than Cantonese ads. As shown in Fig. 5, the results of one-way ANOVA indicate a significant main effect ($M_{\text{Mandarin}} = 5.24 < M_{\text{Cantonese}} = 3.95$, $F(1,77) = 75.44$, $p < .01$), supporting H3a. H3b predicts that with the emotional appeal, Cantonese ads should result in more favorable brand attitudes than Mandarin ads. The results also show a significant main effect ($M_{\text{Mandarin}} = 4.15 < M_{\text{Cantonese}} = 5.03$, $F(1,78) = 28.57$, $p < .01$), which supports H3b.

H4a predicts that with the rational appeal, Mandarin language ads will result in higher memory than Cantonese language ads. The results as presented in Figs. 6–7 indicate that the main effects were not significant for both the unaided recall test ($M_{\text{Mandarin}} = 2.41 > M_{\text{Cantonese}} = 2.38$, $F(1,77) = 0.04$, $p = .85 > .05$) and the brand recognition rates ($P_{\text{Mandarin}} = 51.28% < P_{\text{Cantonese}} = 55.00%$, $\chi^2 = 0.11$, $p > .05$), rejecting H4a. H4b predicts that with the emotional appeal, Cantonese ads will result in higher memory than Mandarin ads. The results show that the main effects were significant for both the unaided recall test ($M_{\text{Mandarin}} = 2.20 < M_{\text{Cantonese}} = 2.83$, $F(1,78) = 15.97$, $p < .01$) and the brand recognition rates ($P_{\text{Mandarin}} = 42.50% < P_{\text{Cantonese}} = 72.50%$, $\chi^2 = 7.37$, $p < .05$), which support H4b.

### 5. Conclusion and discussion

#### 5.1. Theoretical implications

The purpose of this study is to examine how a spokesperson’s accents affect advertising persuasion for different products and ad appeals. The results of the two studies support most of the hypotheses. Study 1 investigated the positive interplay between product involvement and spokesperson’s accent in producing advertising persuasion. The study found that in high- involvement product advertisements, a standard accent (Mandarin) will enhance consumer brand attitudes and memory, whereas in low-involvement product advertisements, a local accent will strengthen consumer brand attitudes and memory. Study 2 examined the moderating effects of ad appeals on the relationship between spokesperson’s accent and advertising persuasion. The study found that when an ad uses a standard accent (Mandarin),

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**Table 4**

Advertising scripts of two appeals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rational appeal</th>
<th>Emotional appeal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Local people 7 (17.5%) Male 20 (50%) Undergraduate 37 (92.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>Local people 0 (0%) Male 20 (50%) Undergraduate 37 (92.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Non-residents 40 (100%) Male 20 (50%) Undergraduate 37 (92.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>Non-residents 24 (61.5%) Male 24 (60%) Undergraduate 37 (92.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5**

Sample description (emotional appeal and rational appeal).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ad appeal</th>
<th>Language group</th>
<th>Whether Native or not</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional appeal</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Local people 7 (17.5%) Male 20 (50%) Undergraduate 37 (92.5%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>Local people 0 (0%)   Male 20 (50%) Undergraduate 37 (92.5%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational appeal</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Local people 15 (38.5%) Male 22 (56.4%) Undergraduate 37 (92.5%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>Non-residents 24 (61.5%) Male 17 (43.0%) Undergraduate 37 (92.5%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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a rational appeal will further enhance consumer brand attitudes; on the other hand, when an ad uses a local accent, an emotional appeal will further enhance both consumer brand attitudes and memory.

However, Study 2 failed to support a positive interplay of a standard accent and a rational appeal in improving consumer memory. One possible explanation might be that the standard accent itself possesses rational qualities (Edwards, 1982; Hermann, 1978) and a rational appeal may not be able to provide more enhancements in consumer memory. Furthermore, a rational appeal as presented as a set of technical information is more difficult to be remembered.

The results echo Lalwani et al.’s (2005) findings that accent and product involvement significantly influence the spokesperson’s perceived credibility and attitude towards the ads. In Study 1, the results indicate that ads promoting low-involvement products will result in more favorable brand attitudes when the ads use Cantonese rather than standard Mandarin, whereas ads promoting high-involvement products will result in more favorable brand attitudes when the ads use standard Mandarin rather than Cantonese.

The findings also partially confirm the Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM) that suggests that the congruity of an accent and an ad appeal will enhance the advertising persuasion. Study 2, for example, found that an emotional appeal in advertising is likely to result in more favorable brand attitudes and a higher level of memory when presented in Cantonese rather than Mandarin, because Cantonese as a local accent may produce a feeling of intimacy and resonance (Noriega & Blair, 2008).

5.2. Managerial implications

The findings add to markers’ knowledge of doing advertising in Chinese markets. Generally, when marketers are advertising products of high involvement, they have to use standard accent such as Mandarin to enhance Chinese consumer brand attitudes and memory. Also, a rational appeal should combine with a standard accent (Mandarin) to improve the advertising persuasion in Chinese markets. When advertising low-involvement products, however, marketers should use a local accent such as Cantonese to create positive consumer brand attitudes and stronger memory. Similarly, an emotional appeal should combine with a local accent (Cantonese) to produce stronger advertising persuasion in Southern China such as Guangdong Province and Hong Kong.

5.3. Limitations and further research

This study has the following limitations that suggest directions for further research: (1) the local language selected in the paper is just one of the various local languages in China, which limits the implications of the study; (2) the ads in the two studies used only the audio part of the ads and neglected some other factors such as music and pictures, which possibly have effects on the ad persuasion with accents; (3) the study did not examine the effects of advertising languages on long term memory.

Further research should look into the effects of more local languages versus the standard language in text advertisements. Also, future studies can explore more interplay effects to understand how to extend the findings in this study to other product categories (e.g., utilitarian and hedonic products). Finally, the experimental method of neuroscience, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), may help cross validate the findings from a physiological view.

References


