

A Study of Cultural Values Reflected in Chinese Social Media Advertising

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Abstract: This study aimed to examine the central cultural values reflected in Chinese social media advertising. The literature review suggests that Chinese advertising culture is characterised by pluralism, the expression of Western cultural values has increased over time, and cultural values vary across product categories. Adopted and adapt model constructed by Pollay (1983) et al., a sample of 91 Chinese social media advertisements from Weibo was analysed through 38 advertising appeals. Hofstede's (2011) culture dimension theory was also adopted for further explanation. Results indicate that Chinese social media advertising culture is characterised by diversity, while traditional Chinese cultural values remain slightly more dominant. Besides, cultural values vary across product categories, which is also need to be noticed.

Keywords: Advertising Appeal; Cultural Values; Advertising Culture; Social Media Advertising; Chinese Culture

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of science and technology, the Internet is present in every aspect, with social media flooding every corner of our lives. In September 2020, Weibo, one of China's largest social media platforms, had 511 million monthly active users and 224 million daily active users ("Weibo 2020 User Development Report"). The vast number of users constitute ample opportunities for commercial promotion, attract businesses and companies utilising social media conducting advertisements to promote and gain recognition for their products and services (Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch et al., 2017). According to the statistics, the scale of the advertising revenue of online advertising in China reached RMB 646.43 billion in 2019, of which social media advertising accounts for 10.1%, and is expected to rise to 10.9% by 2021 ("China Online Advertising Market Annual Insight Report - Short Version 2020"). Therefore, we can assume that social media advertising in China has developed significantly and has a relatively strong influence. It also indicates that the competition in the social media advertising area will become even more intense in the future.

On the other hand, Advertising promotes products by pointing out the value embedded in them and the value that using a product may achieve, allowing customers to form product and brand perceptions (Pollay 1983), leading to better sales of the product. Therefore, to enhance the effectiveness of advertising, a deeper understanding of current social media culture and an accurate grasp of cultural values manifest in it is needed to develop targeted marketing strategies to cater to its target group's values for profit-making purposes (Fiske 2010).

Meanwhile, advertising content is often created by the cultural elites (e.g., advertising copywriters), who consistently produce a more purely, even stereotypically, value-based portrayal for the target audience (Morling & Lamoreaux 2008). Therefore, studying the cultural values embodied in existing advertising and the differences of values shown in different product industries' advertisements can help provide a more intuitive understanding of cultural value features in social media advertising.

This paper takes the Chinese social media platform Weibo as a study object and measure the central cultural values embedded in the advertisements. The study results may reference Chinese and international advertisers to understand the

prevailing cultural values on Chinese social media platforms and the differences in advertising culture across product categories to help develop targeted advertising strategies.

Around the content and objectives of the study, two research questions are posed in this paper: Q1 What are the central cultural values reflected in Chinese social media advertisements? Q2 Do the cultural values displayed in Chinese social media advertising vary from industry to industry?

2. Literature review

As advertising both reflects and influences culture (Albers-Miller & Gelb 1996), in recent years, with the continuous development of the advertising industry, the study of advertising culture has also received increasing attention from scholars. Consistent with the overall classification of cultural studies, culture study has also unfolded along two different lines, critical analysis and empirical research (Wang 2003).

2.1 Critical Analysis of Advertising Culture

The qualitative study of advertising culture focuses on applying various cultural studies theories to explain the phenomena presented in advertising. For example, structuralism and post-structuralism focus on advertisements' content, examining the correspondence between the "signifier" and the "signified" (Storey 2018). In John Storey's book, he used an advertisement for hiring teachers to explain this. Researchers pay attention to cultural agreement forming and revealing what is implied in this correspondence and generally aim to make explicit the rules and conventions that govern the production of meaning.

Scholars of advertising critical studies use advertising as an entry point to reproduce the dynamic structures and worlds of meaning in a particular society and study social relations and social formations at a specific stage in history (Zhang 2019). Many cultural studies theories, such as cultural hegemony (Gramsci 2007), have been confirmed, applied, and developed in the study of advertising culture, meanwhile help analyse the content of advertising cultural implications.

2.2 Empirical Study of Advertising Culture

Cultural value is a widely used concept in empirical studies of advertising culture, which refers to the dominant ideas or principles that govern the thinking and actions of people in a given society (Wang 2003), being determinants of virtually all kinds of behaviour and attitudes (Pollay 1983). Because this study aims to measure the cultural values embedded in advertising culture, the research methodology is primarily referenced from previous empirical studies, which benefits in capturing cultural characteristics and difference of cultural products (Morling & Lamoreaux 2008).

To better measure and quantify cultural values, advertising appeal models are widely used in empirical research of advertising culture. Pollay (1983) conducted the earliest systematically coding scheme (Morling & Lamoreaux 2008) to measure cultural appeals manifest in advertising, which has now been widely used as a primary theoretical framework (Han 2014). Through deeply studied work on value analysis, focus on the advertising area, this study provides an intensive list with 42 measurable advertising appeals extracted. Using this measuring procedure and consolidating all the results, researchers can derive an overall description of the test subjects' cultural values. This study provided a process and criteria for coding with relatively strong prescriptive and actionable, which is the primary reference for constructing the advertising appeal model of this research.

2.3 Social Media Advertising Research

There has developed relatively mature research frameworks and research models for empirical advertising research and have applied them in different segments. However, studies specifically in social media have not been a heavily researched topic (Okazaki & Taylor 2013), studies which focus on Chinese social media platform are even fewer.

Okazaki and Taylor (2013) gave likely reasons for social media advertising cross-national studies due to the short developing cycle and the very recent evolution of social media. Although the share of social media advertising is trending upwards

relatively quickly, it still does not constitute the bulk of online advertising revenue (“China Online Advertising Market Annual Insight Report - Short Version 2020”). Besides, the global dominated social media platform is officially banned in China while local Chinese apps dominate the market. Difficult access and lack of understanding of local platforms make it difficult for foreign scholars to conduct research. Base on this, the lag in scientific research is also quite understandable.

3. Discussion

Appeals such as “Individual/independence”, “adventure”, “modern”, “technological”, “productivity” presents at high frequencies of advertising culture, all of which demonstrate a strong desire to be unique and pursuit of novelty, all in keeping with the modern characteristic and more intense than in TV commercials (e.g., Zhang 2009). In analysing the reasons for this, the author believes that it may still be primarily based on the features of the main user groups of social media and the development of Chinese society. Started in 1978 with the “reform and opening up” (“Chinese economic reform”), China began its high-speed modernisation. Influencing by high-speed economic development, there was also an influx of Western and Modernisation culture. Most current mainstream social media users have gone through this process, generally grown up in an international cultural environment. Thus, modernism, as well as individualistic values, became part of their dominant values. Regarding them as target consumers, advertisers cater to their values to attract their attention. Thus, it is not difficult to understand that modern characteristics became the predominance of cultural values in Chinese social media advertising.

On the other hand, though it is lower than the expectation based on previous research, appeals such as “family” and “traditional” representing traditional Chinese values are still reflected in the advertising sample. This result may be related to the share of product categories. As vehicle sales, beauty and fragrances, electronics, and telecom products’ advertisements, which prefer to present appeals such as “technological” and “modern”, took considerable weight in samples. To some extent, these businesses are led by innovations. The characteristics of the products themselves are contrary to tradition.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, this study analyses 91 Chinese social media advertisements collected from Weibo, one of China’s largest social media platforms, to examine the cultural values reflected in Chinese social media advertising. Through using the advertising model with 38 appeals, which is adopted from models constructed by Pollay (1983) et al., find that a diversity of cultural appeals in social media advertising, with the leading advertising appeals, are “celebrity”, “effective”, “individual/independence”, “beauty” and “adventure”. Referencing the study of Albers-Miller and Gelb (1996) combines Hofstede’s culture dimension theory with the appeals model, further discovering values related to individualism, high power distance, strong uncertainly avoidance, masculinity, long orientation and indulgence dimensions are more commonly used in Chinese social media ads. Both Eastern and Western cultural values are well represented in Chinese social media advertising, with traditional Chinese culture presenting slightly more. Moreover, a chi-square analysis indicates that cultural values reflected in Chinese social media advertising vary between product categories.

Employed a content analysis approach, this research focuses on the context of ordinary advertisements in the form of video, audio and pictures. However, audio-visual effects and new forms of advertising such as interactive advertising also significantly impact consumers and shows the importance in the social media advertising market. Future studies should explore a more practical approach and do related research.

In addition, social media platforms gradually promote personalised advertising. For collecting more objective data, further research could use big data collection tools, extensive crawling of social media platforms for advertising, and developing classification criteria to improve the efficiency of data analysis.

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