A Comparative Research on Cultural Values in Chinese and American Advertisements

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The paper is based on the research of Greet Hofstede’s Model of Cultural Dimensions and Edward T. Hall’s Context Culture Theory. According to their theories, the author focuses on four dimensions (context culture, power distance, long-term versus short-term orientation to time, and individualism versus collectivism) to compare differences between Chinese and American cultural values in advertising. Therefore, this paper aims to reduce barriers existing in the process of cultural communication, strengthen the understanding of multi-culture, and facilitate the mixture of cultural exchange.

Keywords: advertising, cultural values, comparative research, cultural communication

Introduction

Advertising has been playing an important role in the globalization of the world economy, which is the key in today’s fierce business competition. Advertisements in certain culture surely embody its unique culture values, which definitely will gain customers from the similar culture. On the basis of Hofstede’s Model of Cultural Dimensions (power distance, long-term versus short-term orientation to time, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity) and Hall’s Context Culture Theory, the author makes comparisons between Chinese and American cultural values in advertising from four dimensions: context culture, power distance, long-term versus short-term orientation to time, individualism versus collectivism.

Definition of Advertising and Cultural Values

The word “advertise” originated from the Latin word “advertise”, which means “to inform somebody of something” or “to make known to the public” (Mueller, 1998, p. 55). There are many kinds of definitions for advertising. Advertising is defined as “a method of delivering a message from a sponsor by an impersonal medium, to many people”, “the use of mass media to carry paid massage for a commercial purpose or to advance a cause, institution, or political candidate”, and “any paid from of non-personal presentation and promotion of idea, goods or service by of identified sponsor” (Mueller, 1998, p. 525).

Values are rooted in social life and provide criteria for behaviors or actions. Values take root in social life
and provide criteria for behaviors (GUAN, 2014, pp. 27-29). In general, cultural values are values that tend to permeate a culture. The culture value is the nutrient or desirability of certain actions or viewpoints among members of the culture. Cultural values are transmitted by many sources (community, media, diplomacy, church, state, and so on) and accordingly, tend to be broad-based, enduring, and relatively steady (FAN, 2012, p. 56).

Differences in Culture Values Embodied in the Advertisement of China and America

Differences in Context Culture

Edward. T. Hall illustrated cultures by the amount of messages implied by the context of the communication itself, despite of the specific words which are spoken. Context is defined as the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event: “The cultures of the world can be compared on a scale from high to low context” (E. Hall & M. Hall, 1990, p. 6). Hall stressed that “a high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, or transmitted part of the message” (Hall, 1976, p. 91). Low context cultures typically value individualism over collectivism and group harmony.

(1) “鹤舞白沙，我心飞翔” (白沙香烟)

The advertisement itself has internal high context characteristics: It implies that people can be relaxed and happy when they smoke. At the same time, it also has external high context characteristics. Chinese culture sees white crane as something auspicious, which is set as a background to present white crane flying up to the sky and people living with white crane simulate the gesture of flying. Linking up with the heart of white crane and people who live together with crane can make people think of the celestial being.

(2) “So... you want mail a strawberry sorbet” (Fast delivery courier COLOR DIRECT)

On the contrary, as a typical low context culture, American culture in the advertisement communication surely pursues certain and accurate information and refuses confused and vague messages. So direct and clear expression is required in the advertisement document in the USA, which can be used to boost its products avoiding any misunderstanding. Can you image posting the ice cream? Let us put aside the possibility of the creative idea. The reader first realizes the special characteristics of the service of COLOR DIRECT: speed, safety, and anything. And these advantages are embodied by a simple strawberry sorbet. Which provides a clue: Even the ice cream can be delivered and then what else cannot by the company? Though the advantages in the company are not mentioned in the advertisement, but we must acknowledge that the American can easily associate with the service provided after reading the advertisement. In other words, American advertisement document in low context prefers to present the attractive and exact point of products to the public.

Differences in Power Distance

The individualism-collectivism dimension refers to how people define themselves and their relationships with others. In an individualist culture, the interest of the individual prevails over the interests of the group. Ties between individuals are loose. People look after themselves and their immediate families. In a collectivist culture, the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual. People are integrated into strong, cohesive in groups that continue throughout a lifetime to protect in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 1980).

(3) “雍容华贵，皇朝气派” (泮溪酒家)

(4) “系出名门，一脉相连” (大华酒店)
The society of high power distance has a high recognition of hierarchy differences caused by power and fortune and is regarded as bases to divide the grades, at the same time, strict hierarchy restricts the society’s communication from bottom to top. High power distance point country like China advocates “absolute authority from bottom to top” in China because of feudal regime for thousands of years and the sense of hierarchy is rather stubborn. In the advertisement of hotel in China, “dynasty”, “a family of pedigree”, “royal”, and so on are common. The intention is that merchants utilize the influence of authority which puts an implication to the public and then the customers are unconsciously influenced and guided.

However, power distance point is relative low in the society like the USA, which does not stress the differences of power and fortune, and people in America think that everyone is equal and everybody enjoys equal opportunity, which can be embodied in advertisements of hotels in the USA:

5) “The best value under the sun” (Days Inn)
6) “American chain of economy motels” (Red Roof)

In the advertisements of hotel in the USA, “value”, “economy”, and “budget” are used more frequently instead of “cheapest” which is seen as poor and be despised by others. Customers of the hotel come from different backgrounds and they are treated as equal no matter their social status. Regardless of the differences of power and fortune, every customer enjoys equal opportunity, therefore, they make guests of different status feel at home.

**Long-Term Versus Short-Term Orientation to Time**

Long-term orientation is when you are focused on the future. You are willing to delay short-term material or social success or even short-term emotional gratification in order to prepare for the future. If you have this cultural perspective, you value persistence, perseverance, saving, and being able to adapt. Short-term orientation is when you are focused on the present or past and consider them more important than the future. If you have a short-term orientation, you value tradition, the current social hierarchy, and fulfilling your social obligations. You care more about immediate gratification than long-term fulfillment.

7) “传奇品质，百年张裕” (张裕葡萄酒)
8) “共创美的的前程，共度美的人生” (美的空调)

The advertisement of Chinese well-known wine industry-Chang Yu Wine is simple eight words which express the deep inside information to the public: The long history is embodied well to appeal to a great number of customers. Maybe you think the wine is a special example which itself emphasizes long history. Looking at the next advertisement created by Midea. Let alone that the advertisement skillfully utilize the two words “美的”, we will get that Chinese people pay much attention to their future and prospect instead of instant joy.

9) “The fun develops instantly” (Polaroid-camera)
10. “Don’t dream it, drive it” (Jaguar)

This is an advertisement designed by famous camera product or Polaroid. The piece of advertisement embodies the function of camera which can grasp the instant moment and the word instantly can well express short-term orientation to time of the USA culture. The second one is the advertisement of Jaguar in America. People in the USA stress the instant achievements, namely do not consider too long or do not immerse yourself in the dream but take actions immediately.
Individualism Versus Collectivism

Human centrism can be classified as individualism and collectivism. Individualism is “the opposite of collectivism; together they form on of the dimensions of national cultures”. “Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family only” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 261). Whereas, collectivism “stands for a society in which people form birth onwards are integrated into strong cohesive in groups that people’s lifetime continues to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 260).

(11) “海尔，中国造” (Haier Electronics)
(12) “中华永在我心中” (中华牙膏)

Collectivism has huge influence on Chinese cultural values, such as its advertising slogans. People in China, a collective country, generally trend to be less personal but expect more from the organizations, institutions, groups, and society. As we all know, China is a collective country. A lot of thought of collectivism can be seen in its cultural values. Just the formal advertisements mention “Haier, made in China” (Haier Electronics), which pays more attention to the brand and wants to make people know that the product is made in China not in other countries.

(13) “Live life in your own lane” (Mercury)
(14) “Welcome to Holiday Inn, where you can just be yourself” (Lido)

In many cases, People in the USA are often individual for its unique cultural values. To a degree, members in individual countries expect to earn more things by themselves not depending on others. And in this piece of advertisement, its values are full of independence, more confidence, and more freedom. According to the two pieces of advertisements, we can find that in the Western country-American, people pay much more attention to individualism; “your own” and “yourself” are common in the American advertisements. Advertisers often stress the enjoyment of people themselves, without thinking about extra elements, for example: Whether the name of the products or services is splendid or fancy. What is more, people in America pay less attention to collective consciousness and rarely attract attention by say something about their country or nation, and maybe they just put patriotism in their heart.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on Greet Hofstede and Edward. T. Hall’s theories, a comparison is drawn between Chinese and American cultural values on advertising. As the paper has studied, China is a country that has high power distance, long-term orientation to time, high-context culture and focuses on collectivism. Conversely, America has low power distance, short-term orientation to time, low-context culture and stresses individualism. Therefore, if readers cannot understand the meaning of advertisements in different countries, readers should learn more cultural background, cultural values, and so on in advance. The thesis is designed to reduce barriers when communicating culture, improve the cultural awareness of people, and enhance the understanding of cultural communication.
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References


