

# Advertising and Values: A Study on Cultural Values in Advertising Targeting the Urban Middle Class in China

Ziqi Ye and Wenhua Li

Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Guangzhou, 510000, China

## ABSTRACT

Advertising is the mirror that reflects social and cultural trends and is capable of shaping society (Sivulka, 2012). However, this mirror is distorted since advertising reflects only selected attitudes, values, lifestyles, and philosophies that work for sellers' interests (Pollay, 1987). This paper examined the advertisements launched in nine of the most popular lifestyle magazines in China, to identify the frequently used values manifested in advertising, and its influences on the lifestyles of Chinese consumers. After content analysis, we found that "utility," "enjoyment," "social status," "accomplishment," and "authority power" are the top five most frequently used values in advertisements targeting the Chinese middle and elite classes. The findings of this study can contribute to advertisers and designers by enabling them to understand the value themes in advertisements that attract them the most.

**Keywords:** Value, Middle class, Advertising

## INTRODUCTION

Advertising, as the carrier of cultural values, plays an important role in mass media communication (Pollay, 1983). Its influences to society and culture are significant. As Sivulka (Sivulka, 2012) pointed out, advertising is the mirror that reflects social and cultural trends and is capable of shaping society. Whether explicit or implicit, all advertisements carry values. Values offer an opportunity to differentiate brands by going beyond product functions and offering symbolic meanings (de Mooij, 2013). We are influenced subtly by the meanings advertisers create in advertisements; in turn, our lifestyles and value priorities can affect the strategies of advertising design and branding. However, this mirror is distorted since advertising reflects only selected attitudes, values, lifestyles, and philosophies that work for sellers' interests (Pollay, 1987). Values are probably one of the most powerful factors in explaining consumer behavior (Okazaki & Mueller, 2007).

To identify the dominant values shown frequently in advertising targeting middle class consumers in China, a content analysis of print advertisements from nine of the most popular lifestyle magazines was conducted. This study has examined advertising appeals as a reflection of changing values in the society, helping us to observe dominant values and social trends in emerging markets like China.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Two key theories are adopted in the value and advertising study: Hofstede's five dimensions of national culture and Schwartz's theory of basic values (Hofstede, 1984, Schwartz, 1992). Two out of five cultural dimensions can be used in explaining values manifest in Chinese advertising: collectivism/individualism, masculinity/femininity. Schwartz Theory of Basic Values identifies ten basic values shared universally. In this study, the values of hedonism, power, achievement, and the dimension of hierarchy are used in explaining dominant values in Chinese advertising.

Both Hofstede's cultural value theory and Schwartz's theory of basic values are adopted as the theoretical foundation of the study. With the development of economy globalization and cultural globalization, the stereotypes of cultural dimensions and value orientations in different countries and nations may change. Therefore, this study tries to use the up-to-date advertisement material to examine the cultural value changes reflecting in advertising in urban China context.

## RESEARCH METHOD

In this research, magazine advertisements are selected as research objects. After the outward magazine positioning, advertising resource bidding material, and publication data are compared, nine of the most popular lifestyle and news magazines targeting the urban elites and the middle class were selected for this study. As the most influential fashion and lifestyle publications, these selected magazines offer high-quality information and high-taste contents, as well as deliver the latest fashion for the urban middle and elite classes. All advertisements in the July to December 2019 issues were collected. Repeated advertisements were included only once. As a result, 525 print advertisements were selected. All the advertisements were at least A4 size (8.5 inches  $\times$  11 inches) to ensure the creative quality and the value display.

The advertising appeals were coded to identify the values that appeared most frequently in the advertisements. Pollay's measurement of values manifest in advertising (Pollay, 1983) is used as the basic measurement guide. The coding sheet was designed based on previous advertising research (Pollay, 1983, Belk & Pollay, 1985, Tse et al. 1985, Zhang & Harwood, 2004). The value theme categories selected for content analysis were based on Schwartz's value system. After carefully compared the wording of values with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1987), Rokeach's instrumental values (Rokeach, 1973), and Kahle's List of Values (LOV) (Kahle et al. 1986), and evaluating value presentation in Chinese advertising, 12 values are finally adopted in the coding sheet: Family, Kinship affection, Accomplishment, Enjoyment, Social status, Love, Sense of belonging, Social responsibility, Utility, Self-fulfillment, Economic value, Authority power.

Two bilingual Chinese coders were involved in the coding process. The coders used gestalt impressions to identify dominant values (Chan & Cheng, 2002). Two coders worked on the same 38% (200 in total) of the advertisements. The inter-coder reliability was good (87%, Scott's  $\pi = .85$ ). One coder continued coding the remaining advertisements. The advertisements

**Table 1.** Frequency of cultural values in magazine advertisements.

Values in advertisements	Frequency	Percent
Utility	106	20.2
Enjoyment	102	19.4
Social status	64	12.2
Accomplishment	58	11.0
Authority power	46	8.8
Self-fulfillment	36	6.9
Sense of belonging	29	5.5
Kinship affection	19	3.6
Love	19	3.6
Economic value	16	3.0
Social responsibility	12	2.3
Family	11	2.1
Other	7	1.3
Total	525	100.0

were also classified according to product categories (e.g., clothing, automobiles; percent agreement: 95%, Scott's  $\pi = .94$ ). Repeated advertisements for the same product were included only once.

## RESULTS

Among these advertisements, 74.7% are foreign brands and only 25.3% are from local brands. Home decoration (19%), dress and accessories (12.2%), automobile (11.8%), furniture (11.2%) and travel (10.5%) are the top five most frequently appearing product categories. These products correlate with the daily middle-class life, from home and car to dressing and leisure activities. These advertisements comprehensively depict the ideal lifestyle scenes created by advertisers. Results indicate "utility (20.2%)," "enjoyment (19.4%)," "social status (12.2%)," "accomplishment (11%)," "authority power (8.8%)," as the five most dominant values used in magazine advertisements targeting Chinese middle-class audiences.

This finding suggests that advertisements in China still play an important role in delivering utility information in product functions and effectiveness. Enjoyment is the second most frequently used value in these advertisements. Enjoyment is considered a typical western value (Cheng, 1997), which was forbidden in Confucian tradition. In Confucian tradition, enjoyment is discouraged. Working hard and not spending more than necessary are considered virtues (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Hedonism and conspicuous consumption are criticized. Nowadays, enjoyment is legitimated by mass media, western movies, and advertisements. Pursuing good quality life and enjoying it is considered a reward for hard work. The value of social status is the third frequently used value theme in magazine advertisements. As elite magazines are targeting the Chinese middle class, their audiences are readers who desire to move upward to a higher social status. These people are likely

to have status consumption. They want to express their social status through consumer goods. The status meanings of consumer goods are usually delivered via advertisements using “social status” value. The frequent use of social status value in advertisements shows the strong need of Chinese consumers for social status.

## **DISCUSSIONS: DOMINANT VALUES IN ADVERTISING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON LIFESTYLES**

In this study, “utility,” “enjoyment,” “social status,” “accomplishment,” and “authority power” are the top five most frequently used values in advertisements targeting the Chinese middle and elite classes. The finding suggests that advertising in lifestyle magazines tries to emphasize these five values over other values, or advertisers believe these values are effective in attracting consumer attention. When values of consumers are consistent with the values reflected in advertising, the likeability toward advertisements, products, and brands will increase, and consequently, advertising will be more effective (Polegato & Bjerke, 2006).

### **Value of Utility and Utilitarian Values**

The value of utility means useful, pragmatic, functional, efficient, and good quality. Advertisements using utility value mainly emphasize the function, durability, and effectiveness of products. The findings suggest that utility is still the most dominant value in China by far.

Nowadays, many products promoted in the advertisements are not new to Chinese consumers. Facing numerous homogeneous products, good quality, advanced technology, and reliable brands have become the biggest concern for consumers, especially for product categories belonging to domestic appliances, skincare, digital devices, and watches. Instead of informing consumers about the existence of latest products as the mainstream advertising themes, advertisers use the value of utility to inform consumers about the benefits of these products, which lead to the good quality of life.

### **Value of Enjoyment and Hedonism**

Hedonism is one of the basic values in Schwartz’s theory, referring to pleasure or sensuous gratification for oneself (Schwartz, 2012). The value of enjoyment belongs to the category of hedonism. The value of enjoyment is a Western value concept, which was first introduced in advertising in the 1980s after economic reforms in China were started. Enjoyment was not encouraged in Confucian tradition. Working hard and not spending more than necessary are considered virtues (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Hedonism and conspicuous consumption were criticized in the 1980s. People in a collectivistic culture, like China, should care about in-group well-being first, instead of personal well-being and enjoyment. Advertising has the power to lead certain cultural values. Attitudes toward enjoyment have been changing in the past 30 years. After solving fundamental survival needs, the Chinese middle class desires a better life, partly because of the influences of advertising. More advertisements are telling Chinese consumers to love themselves by living

a good life. The changing attitudes on enjoyment have been identified by numerous scholars (Zhang & Shavitt, 2003).

The results indicate foreign brands use the value of enjoyment more frequently than local brands. The advertisements of foreign brands often adopt foreign models to depict advanced Western lifestyle scenes, which encourages Chinese consumers to learn and live that way. Advertisements for furniture, travel, dress and accessories are more likely to apply the value of enjoyment and stimulate the dream of the consumer for the ideal home, self, and advanced lifestyles.

### **Value of Social Status, Symbolic Consumption and Power Distance**

The value of power distance can be explained as power hierarchy or social status. Power distance measures the unequal distribution of power, which relates with one's social position (Hsu et al. 2013). In high power distance cultures, maintaining a high social status is very important. one's social status relates with the respect from others in the society. Desiring for higher social status is normal in high power distance cultures. Therefore, social status is an effective value appeal manifest in advertising in high power distance cultures.

Advertisements of social status persuade people to believe that using the product or service will display or even raise their social positions. Social status is an old theme for the Chinese. In Confucian culture, stability of society is based on the social status system of the people. Chinese people prefer to choose the lifestyles to match social status (Bond, 1996). Hence, consumption becomes the symbol of social status. For Hofstede (1984), high scores on power distance lead to status needs. In high power distance cultures, like China, status brands demonstrate the place of the consumer in a hierarchy. Keywords, such as elite, upper class, and luxurious lifestyle, are used in advertisements to appeal to the interest of the middle class. This strategy creates an illusion that consumers could move to a higher class by owning these status goods.

### **Value of Accomplishment and Cultural Dimension of Masculinity**

The value of accomplishment is an important characteristic of masculine culture combined with individualism. Accomplishment is a typical American cultural value, which can be traced to Protestant work ethics (Weber, 2002). Protestant work ethic advocates the benefits of hard work, which leads to an accomplishment-oriented society and is considered an important impetus for economic development in the US. (Schiffman, 2014). The value of accomplishment usually associates with conspicuous consumption and consumerism. Advertisements with the theme of accomplishment are tempting for the middle class because they depict products as necessities for upper-class lifestyles. Through imitating the dresses, home decorations, and leisure activities of the middle and upper class depicted in movies, TV series, and advertisements, consumers strengthen the value of accomplishment and social status.

The results suggest that Western models appear more frequently in the advertisements with the theme of accomplishment. Among the

advertisements with the theme of accomplishment, foreign brands appear more than local brands. Wine advertisements in China mainly use the value of accomplishment to indicate wine as the drink for successful people.

### **Value of Authority Power and Value Category of Hierarchy**

The value category of hierarchy includes social power, authority, influential and self-enhancement (de Mooij, 2013). In hierarchy cultures, power, resources, authority of individual distributes unequally. The whole society admires authority. Hierarchical roles are legitimate (Hsu et al. 2013). The Chinese have a tradition of trusting authority power. Numerous advertisements frequently use expert and celebrity endorsements to create a reliable impression of the product based on the trust in experts and celebrities. Several consumers may associate themselves with celebrity endorsers through ownership of endorsed products. Other consumers may consider the product as good quality because of the positive images of the expert endorsers. "Generation Y" consumers in China pay intense attention to media celebrities (Hung et al. 2011) and likely share news of their idols with friends. Celebrity endorsement increases brand awareness and consumption intention (Chan et al. 2013). The results in the present study suggest that domestic appliances, skincare, and watch and jewelry products in China are likely to use celebrity endorsement. Among the magazine advertisements collected in this study, 41.3% use Chinese celebrities, 37% use Western celebrities, and 17.4% use Korean celebrities.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper identified the dominant values in magazine advertisements that target the Chinese middle class. The value of utility is the most frequently used value in many advertisements, especially among product categories of electronic devices, high-end watches, and skincare products. The value of enjoyment is the second most dominant value. Enjoyment was encouraged only when economic reforms were introduced in China, which is considered a collectivistic culture. People in collectivistic cultures value group goals, benefits, and needs over individual benefits. Social norms and in-group beliefs are rated prior to individual pleasures. The situation is changing, however. Lifestyle magazines targeting the middle class use a value theme of enjoyment to promote Western advanced lifestyles and stimulate hedonic consumption. Social status is the third most dominant value identified. The middle class has the strong will to express their social status via ownership of consumer goods. Advertising plays an important role as status symbol by transferring symbolic values from product to consumers. Many status goods use the value of social status to trigger symbolic consumption. Overall, individualistic values, such as enjoyment and accomplishment, appear more frequently than collectivistic values in lifestyle magazines targeting the new middle class.

This study examines value and lifestyle issues from the perspective of advertising in emerging markets. The mediating role of advertising enables us to better understand the formation of and changes in the values and lifestyles of the new middle class in emerging markets, such as China. The findings of

this study can also contribute to advertisers and designers by enabling them to understand the value themes in advertisements that attract them the most.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to acknowledge the Guangdong College Scientific Research Project (2017WQNCX082) and Guangdong Education Scientific Research Project (2021GXJK470) for the support of this research.

## REFERENCES

- Belk, R. W., & Pollay, R. W. (1985). Images of ourselves: The good life in twentieth century advertising. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 11(4), 887–897.
- Bond, M. H. E. (1996). *The handbook of Chinese psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Chan, K., & Cheng, H. (2002). One country, two systems: Cultural values reflected in Chinese and Hong Kong television commercials. *Gazette (Leiden, Netherlands)*, 64(4), 385–400.
- Chan, K., Ng, Y. L., & Luk, E. K. (2013). Impact of celebrity endorsement in advertising on brand image among Chinese adolescents. *Young Consumers*.
- Cheng, H. (1997). Toward an understanding of cultural values manifest in advertising: A content analysis of Chinese television commercials in 1990 and 1995. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 74(4), 773–796.
- De Mooij, M. (2013). *Global marketing and advertising: Understanding cultural paradoxes*. Sage.
- Hofstede, G. (1984). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values* (Vol. 5). sage.
- Hofstede, G., & Bond, M. H. (1988). The Confucius connection: From cultural roots to economic growth. *Organizational dynamics*, 16(4), 5–21.
- Hsu, S. Y., Woodside, A. G., & Marshall, R. (2013). Critical tests of multiple theories of cultures' consequences: Comparing the usefulness of models by Hofstede, Inglehart and Baker, Schwartz, Steenkamp, as well as GDP and distance for explaining overseas tourism behavior. *Journal of Travel Research*, 52(6), 679–704.
- Kahle, L. R., Beatty, S. E., & Homer, P. (1986). Alternative measurement approaches to consumer values: the list of values (LOV) and values and life style (VALS). *Journal of consumer research*, 13(3), 405–409.
- Okazaki, S., & Mueller, B. (2007). Cross-cultural advertising research: where we have been and where we need to go. *International Marketing Review*, 24(5), 499–518.
- Polegato, R., & Bjerke, R. (2006). The link between cross-cultural value associations and liking: The case of Benetton and its advertising. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 46(3), 263–273.
- Pollay, R. W. (1983). Measuring the cultural values manifest in advertising. *Current issues and research in advertising*, 6(1), 71–92.
- Pollay, R. W. (1987). On the value of reflections on the values in “The Distorted Mirror”. *Journal of Marketing*, 51(3), 104–110.
- Rokeach, M. (1973). *The nature of human values*. Free press.
- Schiffman, L. G. & Wisenblit, J. (2014). *Consumer behavior*. 11<sup>th</sup> Edition. Pearson.
- Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. In *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 25, pp. 1–65). Academic Press.

- Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An overview of the Schwartz theory of basic values. *Online readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1), 2307–0919.
- Sivulka, J. (2011). *Soap, sex, and cigarettes: A cultural history of American advertising*. Cengage Learning.
- Tse, D. K., Belk, R. W., & Zhou, N. (1989). Becoming a consumer society: A longitudinal and cross-cultural content analysis of print ads from Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China, and Taiwan. *Journal of consumer research*, 15(4), 457–472.
- Weber, M. (2002). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism and other writings*. Penguin.
- Zhang, J., & Shavitt, S. (2003). Cultural Values in Advertisements to the Chinese X-Generation--Promoting Modernity and Individualism. *Journal of advertising*, 32(1), 23–33.
- Zhang, Y. B., & Harwood, J. (2004). Modernization and tradition in an age of globalization: Cultural values in Chinese television commercials. *Journal of communication*, 54(1), 156–172.