

Advertising Creativity in China: The moderating effect of cultural uncertainty avoidance on consumers' need for cognitive closure

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There is little doubt that creativity is central to advertising practice, yet there is a surprising lack of empirical knowledge around it. Recent research suggests that creativity, in addition to getting advertising noticed, also enhances consumer processing by inducing a desire to postpone closure (DPC) and thus keep an open mind (Smith and Yang). This has significant implications for practice but has yet to be tested against the moderating influence of culture. This paper explores the suggestion that consumers from high uncertainty avoidance (UA) cultures are more reluctant to process highly creative ad messages than their low UA culture counterparts because unpredictable (ie. creative) messages are incongruent with their need for certainty (Choi and Kim). It focuses on China, a nation ranked by Hofstede as high in uncertainty avoidance, but very important as the world's largest and fastest growing consumer market (Chan and Cheng; Okazaki and Mueller; Tse; Niu, Dong and Chen; Yaprak). Discussions with Chinese advertising professionals suggest that Chinese ads are low in creativity because creativity is not valued or understood by clients. Whilst a growing creative confidence is evident in Chinese music and arts, the same cannot be said for advertising practice. It is anticipated that the findings of this research will go some way to informing the manner in which advertising creativity is applied when targeting consumers from different points along the cultural uncertainty avoidance spectrum and may contribute to a greater understanding of the function and value of advertising creativity in China.

Keywords

Creativity, China, advertising, Hofstede, culture

Introduction

[1] There is little doubt that creativity is central to the role and practice of advertising. Entire departments of advertising agencies, international advertising award shows, and numerous chapters of advertising textbooks are dedicated to creativity (Smith and Yang; Smith et al; Till and Baack; Zinkhan). Yet, for all that is written and said about advertising creativity, there is a surprising lack of empirical knowledge around it (Sasser and Koslow; Smith and Yang; Zinkhan) – even less from a cross-cultural perspective.

[2] There are, however, a handful of researchers (eg. Yang and Smith; Smith, Chen and Yang; Smith et al; Dahlen, Rosengren and Torn) who have delivered significant contributions to advertising creativity research. In particular, Smith and Yang set up a working definition of advertising creativity (with divergence and relevance identified as key components) and established a model of the role and effects of advertising creativity. One of their key findings is that creativity not only causes consumers to pay attention to advertising messages, but may also assist consumers in the processing of advertising information by inducing a desire to postpone closure (DPC), thus keeping an open mind towards the advertisement and brand.

[3] The issues raised in the following paper lie at the junction of three important areas of existing theory – information processing and persuasion (including the important issue of cognitive closure), advertising creativity and the influence of culture. Each area is examined in turn, leading to a discussion of the possible implications for advertising creativity in a Chinese context.

Information processing and persuasion

[4] Contemporary information processing theories – such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chaiken; Chaiken, Liberman and Eagly) – provide a paradigm for understanding attitude formation and change through persuasion. Applied to a marketing and advertising context these models facilitate the prediction and testing of consumer response to advertising messages. In addition, the integrative models of advertising proposed by Smith and Swinyard, MacInnis and Jaworski, identify important phases of ad processing, linking these to consumer responses – including curiosity and uncertainty. These factors have parallels with cognitive closure theory and cultural uncertainty avoidance, to be discussed in the next section of the paper – in particular, need for cognitive closure (NCC), which is defined as an individual's desire for a firm answer to a question and an aversion toward ambiguity (Kruglanski and Webster).

[5] Persuasion is more likely to be achieved when NCC is low (or conversely, DPC is high) because consumers are in a more curious and open-minded state; judgment is suspended until all the available information has been processed. In the context of advertising persuasion theory, consumers are less likely to reach a premature decision, are open to new information about the brand or ad and less likely to use cognitive defense mechanisms (Jacks and Cameron) when processing persuasive messages (Yang and Smith).

Advertising creativity

[6] Smith and Yang paved the way for some innovative thinking about advertising creativity and consolidated the work of a small number of researchers who had gone before (eg. El-Murad and West; Till and Baak), setting up a pragmatic and consumer-oriented definition and approach to advertising creativity.

[7] According to Smith and Yang, some advertising creativity was shown to have positive effects for consumers, aside from just creating a 'contrast effect' (ie. standing out from the crowd). This led to their suggestion that creativity induces both cognitive and affective consumer processing responses, encouraging depth of processing (thus maximising recall) and a willingness to keep an open mind towards the advertising message:

Consumers are often skeptical (close-minded) when processing information from a vested interest source, so they are unlikely to change existing beliefs or attitudes based on ad claims... any strategy that can reduce resistance to persuasion and make consumers more open-minded can have a significant impact on consumer ad viewing intentions and brand purchase intentions (Smith and Yang 945).

[8] Yet, there are still many questions left unanswered around the role and effect of advertising creativity - especially with regards to the potentially moderating influence of cultural values on consumer processing or the effect of advertising creativity.

Influence of culture

[9] Various systems for ranking cultural values have been developed over the years. Of these, Hofstede's five cultural values are probably the most well known. These include power distance,

individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation (particularly referring to societies that hold Confucian values) (Hatzithomas et al). Research that has investigated links between culture and advertising creativity has tended to focus on the contrast between individualist versus collectivist cultures (Zhang and Gelb; Zhang and Neelankavil; Zhang and Shavitt; Wang; Li et al; Zhang). However, there is some research that suggests that another of Hofstede's cultural dimensions - uncertainty avoidance (UA) - could have as at least as much bearing on the way consumers process advertising messages (Zhang and Gelb; Steenkamp et al; Jung and Kellaris; Choi and Kim).

[10] Hofstede defined uncertainty avoidance as the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertain, ambiguous, or undefined situations (Culture's consequences: International differences; Cultures and organizations; Culture's consequences: Comparing values). By this definition, UA appears to have significant parallels with both the definition (ie. divergence) and effect of advertising creativity (ie. open-mindedness) proposed by Smith and Yang.

[11] Jung and Kellaris, Leonard et al and Usunier and Lee, among others, have suggested that people from high UA cultures prefer predictable situations that lead to a reduction in ambiguity and are more likely to apply decision heuristics to information processing than those from low UA cultures. This leads to the premise, expressed by Choi and Kim, that consumers in high UA cultures would be expected to prefer less ambiguity and more certainty in advertising messages, therefore rendering higher levels of creativity in advertising ineffective - and possibly even counter-productive - whilst consumers from low UA cultures would be expected to respond more favourably to higher levels of creativity. The implications of such divergent consumer preferences would be significant to advertisers targeting consumers from either end of the UA spectrum - impacting as they would on optimal levels of creativity to be employed for effective advertising.

[12] According to Hofstede's 2001 rankings, China ranked high in uncertainty-avoidance - ie. intolerant of uncertainty and ambiguity, less inclined to open-mindedness and more conservative (Steenkamp et al; Chhokar, Brodbeck and House; Choi and Kim; Leonard et al). However, by way of complete contrast, Hofstede's earlier rankings from 1980 and 1991 listed China as a low uncertainty-avoidance culture. Such inconsistency serves to highlight the difficulty of providing a definitive measure for something as dynamic and fluid as culture (Fernandez et al; McEwen et al; Nakata) and calls into question the assumption that cultural values are generalisable across entire nations. Certainly the rapid cultural shift that is taking place within China (Fernandez et al; McEwen et al; Nakata) and the diversity within the vast population points to the need for intra-national as well as cross-cultural research when seeking to understand consumer behaviour and motivations across this

culturally complex nation. It is expected that Chinese respondents from the large tier one and two, more westernised cities of China's eastern seaboard such as Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai (Nielson), will rank differently in UA to those from the more regional, less developed (yet still economically and demographically significant) tier three and four cities such as Ningbo, Guilin and Lanzhou (Nielson). Gathering a range of cultural value responses will serve the added purpose of identifying and documenting some of China's contemporary cultural change, as well as capturing the impact of this change on individual consumer behaviour.

Advertising Creativity in China

[13] Tim Broadbent, Global Effectiveness Director at Ogilvy and Mather, Beijing, makes the point that Asian advertising in general, and Chinese advertising in particular, is not very creative (Broadbent). He cites the preference for product demonstrations over emotional appeals as the main reason for lack of creativity in Chinese advertising, whilst debunking various myths around the idea that Chinese consumers are somehow less likely to respond favourably to creativity.

[14] This aligns with recent discussions held with Chinese advertising practitioners who suggested that Chinese ads are generally very low in creativity because creativity is not valued or understood by advertising clients. Others cited a lack of training opportunities for 'home-grown' Chinese advertising creatives – due in large part to conservative family values that place priority on children going into traditionally prestigious roles (such as medicine or accounting) - and an education system that is said to stifle creativity from a young age ("Be Creative, Children").

[15] While there are examples of the rise of a new Chinese creative confidence in music and the arts, this hasn't yet reached the advertising profession. Thus, empirical evidence of the value of creativity in advertising is required before clients accept (what they perceive as) more 'risky' executions. If it can be demonstrated that creativity makes good business sense in getting advertising noticed and processed more effectively, then the Chinese advertising industry has a case for investing in greater creativity. This could eventually be expected to result - by a trickle-down effect - in greater community acceptance of creative industries, including advertising.

[16] It therefore remains to be seen whether the cultural value of uncertainty avoidance impacts on individual consumers' desire to postpone closure and thus their preference for greater or lesser levels of advertising creativity.

Future research

[17] While existing literature picks up on strong parallels between cultural uncertainty avoidance and need for cognitive closure, there has been no examination of the intersection of the two. This raises the following question - to what degree does culture, especially the influence of uncertainty avoidance, moderate the relationship between ad creativity, closure and subsequent consumer behaviour - which in turn leads to the following propositions:

P1: Advertisements with higher levels of creativity are more likely to be associated with decreased need for cognitive closure (NCC)

P2: Desire to postpone closure (DPC) is more likely to result in favourable outcomes for the ad and the brand in terms of knowledge retained, relevant connections made between ad and brand and liking for both ad and brand

P3: Increased knowledge and liking for the ad and brand is more likely to lead to positive consumer behaviour such as ad viewing and purchase intentions

P4: Cultural uncertainty avoidance is expected to have a moderating effect between ad creativity and postponement of closure such that, under conditions of high uncertainty avoidance, highly creative ad executions will be rejected

P5. Chinese consumers in tier one or two cities may be more accepting of higher levels of ad creativity than their tier three or four city counterparts

Conclusion

[23] The paucity of empirical research into advertising creativity - its effects, measures and even definitions - creates an opportunity to validate and extend existing measures to include the possible moderating effect of culture on consumer response to creative advertisements. One key theory, developed by Smith and Yang, is that advertising creativity induces a desire to postpone closure in the minds of consumers, leaving them more open-minded and receptive towards the advertising message. The question is then whether cultural values - in particular, uncertainty avoidance (UA) - have a moderating influence on the demonstrated effect of creativity. It has been suggested that consumers in high uncertainty avoidance cultures would prefer less ambiguity and more certainty in advertising messages. If this proves to be the case, then higher levels of creativity in advertising would likely prove less effective in the more regional, traditional and less developed areas of China and more effective in regions that are more 'cosmopolitan' with correspondingly lower levels of UA. Whatever the findings, they will inform the way that advertising creativity is applied when targeting consumers

from different points along the cultural uncertainty avoidance spectrum and may contribute to a greater understanding of the function and value of advertising creativity in China.

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