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A Comparative Study on the Differences of Advertising Ethics between China and the United States in Cross-cultural Contexts

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Abstract: Due to the significant differences in history, culture and law, the basic characteristics of advertising ethics expression, as well as the standards and principles for ethical misconduct in advertising, vary among different countries or regions. As two typical representative countries in the dissemination of Chinese and Western advertising cultures, the differences in advertising ethics between China and the United States have certain research value for the current practice of cross-border advertising dissemination. The research focuses on representative advertising works that can showcase the cultural background differences or present the ethical tendencies of the two countries. Under the perspective of contemporary cross-cultural communication, it conducts a comparative analysis of the cultural and ethical manifestations of advertising in the two countries. The research specifically combines the three dimensions of cultural patterns divided by Hofstede, using positive or negative cases of Chinese and American advertisements to explore the issues of advertising ethics expression and ethical misconduct in China and the United States. Based on the cultural differences between China and the United States, it proposes normative strategies for addressing advertising ethics issues in the two countries.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication, cultural differences, advertising ethics, Chinese and American cultures

1. Introduction

The term "ethics" generally refers to the cultural and moral frameworks agreed upon in a society, which can both provide positive moral guidance and norms for a cultural activity, as well as provide a certain degree of constraint on moral misconduct^[1]. Advertising ethics in China and the United States generally refers to the sum of social norms, moral standards and behavioural norms that need to be strictly followed in the dissemination of advertising works in China and the United States. In the context of global economic integration, international cross-cultural communication is becoming more and more frequent. Due to the influence of cultural differences, the situation of intercultural communication and integration will inevitably bring about the contradiction and conflict of ethical values. Advertising is an important research field of cross-cultural communication, and the development of globalised Internet media has also greatly promoted the diversity of cross-border advertising communication channels and cultural expressions. As a product of commercial capital operation, multinational brand advertisements, on the one hand, as products in the spiritual field, carry a certain cultural background and national

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values; on the other hand, they also need to reasonably disseminate the brand's inherent cultural values on the basis of catering to the ethical backgrounds and aesthetic concepts of other countries.

2. Background and reasons for the selection of the topic

Since China's accession to the WTO, there have been many cases of crisis public relations caused by improper localised communication of multinational brands in China: Dolce & Gabbana suffered great public pressure and brand blockade because of its blasphemy and insult to Chinese culture and tradition; Toyota's "domineering" advertisement of the Shishi in the Chinese market (Fig. 1) violated the politically sensitive topic between China and Japan; and Nike's "Scary Room" advertisement (Fig. 2) was controversial because of its blasphemy of Chinese national culture and customs. Nike's "Room of Horrors" advertisement (Fig. 2) is controversial because of its blasphemy against Chinese culture and customs. Therefore, under the perspective of cross-cultural communication, re-examining the localised marketing and communication strategies of multinational brands, and identifying the differences in the ethical expressions of advertisements in different cultures and the internal causes of cultural conflicts, will have a positive effect on the practice of globalised communication of multinational advertisements.

As two typical countries in terms of cultural orientation and ethical values, the United States and China can, to a certain extent, fully represent the East and West cultures and reflect the differences between the East and West cultures. The advertising ethics of China and the United States not only carry the connotation of Chinese and Western cultures, but also are an important consideration for the localisation and internationalisation of international brands. In this paper, we will explore the differences in advertising ethics between China and the United States and the deep-rooted causes of advertising ethical misconduct in China and the United States through the literature research method and in the context of cross-cultural communication, taking the cultural background of China and the United States as the perspective. Finally, we will analyse the normative countermeasures of advertising ethics based on the differences of the two countries' national conditions.

Figure 1:



Figure 2:



3. the differences between Chinese and American cultural backgrounds and the ethical performance of advertising

The causes of the differences in the characteristics of Chinese and American advertisements include various factors, such as the differences in the degree of economic development and legal norms between the two countries, and the different values and ways of thinking formed by different cultural backgrounds. The degree of economic development will affect the development and content of advertising culture, and the differences in cultural background will also affect the formulation of legal provisions.

As far as law is concerned, the world is divided into two systems: the law of the sea system, represented by the United Kingdom and the United States, which respects unwritten customary law, and the civil law system, represented by China. The law of the sea system respects the unwritten customary law, giving rise to the United

States of America's self-regulation-led advertising regulatory system, the United States of America's advertising ethical regulatory framework is slightly lax, the content and form of advertisements are more diversified; while China belongs to the civil law system, giving rise to the "government-led" advertising regulatory system, the advertising ethical framework is more strict^[2], and the restrictions are more stringent^[2]. China, on the other hand, belongs to the civil law system, which has given rise to a "government-led" advertising regulatory system and a more restrictive framework for advertising ethics^[2].

As far as culture is concerned, Hofstede, a Dutch intercultural scholar, has proposed five dimensions of cultural patterns, including individualism, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, femininity, masculinity, and short-term and long-term orientation. In this section, the differences and similarities between Chinese and American cultural values and ethics will be analysed through the first three more representative cultural dimensions^[3].

3.1 Individualism and collectivism

The individualistic culture led by the United States places more emphasis on the independence of the individual and more emphasis on the value of the individual. In the process of consumption, Americans are more inclined to rationalist way of thinking. The classic advertisements reflecting the American individualistic cultural orientation are as follows.

- (1) An American brand of wine copy: a man's taste is determined by his use of the product - trust in personal judgement, emphasis on personal rationality.
- (2) The United States Military Recruiting Service's text: The Army of One (Becoming an All-Rounder) - emphasises the realisation of self-worth rather than dedication to the collective and the nation, and caters to the emotional element of heroism and the promotion of individual strength and courage in the United States culture. This is very different from the Chinese emotional motivation to join the army "to serve the motherland".
- (3) Ford car copy: not the same company, not the same car - individual differences, personality claims.
- (4) In 2017, in the United States Dior new perfume *The New Eau de Parfum* advertising film: incarnation of Miss Dior Natalie Portman in the exuberant enthusiasm, romantic and sexy - to show women's self-independence and personality liberation style.

The collectivist culture represented by China, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on the concept of shared benefits for the group, and Confucian morality and ethics have been rooted in the hearts and minds of the people for thousands of years. The integrity of China's geographical environment has given rise to the traditional ideas of harmony and unity, emphasis on interpersonal relationships and the importance of the family. The concepts of "loyalty, forgiveness and moderation (忠恕中庸)" advocated by Confucianism, "unity of heaven and mankind (天人合一)" by Taoism, and "doing good to others" by Buddhism are all essentially stressing the importance of social harmony and harmony. The concepts of "loyalty, forgiveness and moderation" advocated by Confucianism, "unity of heaven and mankind" by Taoism, and "harmony with others" by Buddhism are all essentially individual attitudes that emphasise harmonious coexistence and a collective approach to survival among all members of society. Therefore, traditional concepts such as patriotism, filial piety, thrift and frugality, and reverence for tradition, which emphasise the maintenance of blood and geographic ties, are widely recognised by the Chinese people and expressed in Chinese cultural works. The following are typical examples of Chinese cultural advertisements.

- (1) Meiling refrigerator advertising slogan: Chinese life - fully embodies the collectivist tendency of the culture, the people of the country's love and support for the country, as well as the support of domestic products of the mentality.
- (2) Coconut Island Turtle and Deer Wine video advert: It tells the story of two old chess players who argue about who is more filial to their children, and in the end, they find out that their children have bought the same kind of wine in order to pay tribute to them - reflecting the cultural tradition of filial piety of the Chinese people.
- (3) mobile communications Shenzhou card advertising slogan: from now on, please inform and drive everyone around you, the correct use of home appliances, cut off the power supply in a timely manner - reflecting the Chinese people to promote the concept of thrifty consumption.

(4) Zhangyu Wine: Legendary Quality, Hundred Years of Zhangyu - implying that Zhangyu wine aging experience of a long time precipitation, catering to the people of the country on the long history and cultural traditions of the revered psychology.

However, with the development of new media advertisements, the interactive and virtual features of online media have made a certain impact on the long cultural tradition and collective way of thinking in China. The values of Internet users tend to be individualised and diversified, and the original collectivism-based ethical model is gradually replaced by individuality liberation and sense of autonomy ^[4]. American professor Negroponte said: "The digital age is the advent of the true age of the individual". In the face of such an inevitable development trend, China needs to keep exploring new ethical and cultural identities to enhance its cultural self-confidence.

3.2 Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance describes the degree to which people in a culture feel uneasy about unpredictability in the face of the apparent certainty of what they perceive. People in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance feel threatened by, and prevent, ambiguous and unpredictable situations, whereas people in cultures with low uncertainty avoidance generally have a greater sense of security, and are more likely to favour relaxed attitudes to life and to encourage a positive approach to challenges. Countries and societies with higher levels of uncertainty aversion tend to be accompanied by clear legal norms, such as China and Japan, while countries with lower levels of uncertainty aversion have a greater appreciation for individual initiative and a stronger sense of innovation.

China believes in absolute truth and authority, and Chinese advertisements usually confirm the practical value of a product by listing the honours it has received, its quality and commercial reputation. For example, the advertisements of Xiaoban Tea, which was listed on the market in 2014, explicitly state that the tea is of a prestigious category, and that the quality of the tea is guaranteed by professional tea masters in the industry, and so on, to express the authority of the product. The level of uncertainty avoidance in China is controversial in the cultural field. On the one hand, under the influence of Chinese history and tradition, Chinese people are accustomed to "learning from the past and knowing the new", emphasising cultural inheritance rather than innovative thinking, but on the other hand, Chinese culture does not show a strong resistance to new and unquantifiable things ^[5]. On the other hand, Chinese culture does not show strong resistance to new and unquantifiable things ^[5]. On the whole, however, China still favours a culture of low uncertainty, as can be argued from the following two perspectives.

First of all, Chinese people are good at divergent thinking and implicit expression, which, to a certain extent, has given rise to the Chinese thinking orientation of "emotion first" ^[6]. For example, the packaging copy of the domestic liquor brand "Jiang Xiaobai" reads: "May I pour wine back to you after ten years, and may we still be old friends after ten years", "Don't go around proclaiming your heart, because you are not the only one who has a story!", "Accompany you to walk the furthest road, is my deepest set", etc., has become a classic case in the Chinese advertising industry. The success of the brand's advertising copy is that it tells the stories that people have hidden in their hearts, bringing people closer to each other, and catering to China's emotional concept of the supremacy of human feelings.

Secondly, compared with the United States, China's level of commodity economic development is still to be improved, the international competitiveness of some of China's domestic product quality is insufficient, the belief in a high degree of uncertainty, the Jedi authority and promote the quality of the product advertisement is difficult to compete with the same type of international authoritative brands, and China's advertisement is gradually converging to a low degree of uncertainty in the direction of the creative appeals, emotional needs, and experiential marketing. Although it is difficult to quantify the actual marketing effect of emotional appeal advertisements on the audience, this path is an important means for Chinese brands to improve their soft competitiveness. As far as Chinese national car brands are concerned, in the international environment of fierce brand competition, traditional hard promotional methods cannot meet the strategic needs of national car brands. For example, Ruilin G5 takes the sporty sedan as the core positioning point of the brand, and calls itself the "King of the track", but the engine power of the modified car is limited, and the market positioning strategy has certain limitations. Chery Automobile combines consumers' emotional and rational demands, and makes a video advertisement with the theme of "Chery

Automobile, thanks for having you all the way", which puts the hard work and hopeful feelings of young people's entrepreneurial road into the sports car that witnesses their struggles all the way to a "soft-selling" promotion to motivate consumers. The "soft-sell" promotion motivates consumers to buy the car.

In American culture, where uncertainty avoidance is significantly lower, people are more able to think outside the box and are willing to break with authority and stereotypes. American advertisements like to be different, and more creative and dramatic tension. 18 years Burger King Halloween video advertisement, a group of people were invited to the Alexandria Hotel, after the psychic will invite other ghosts into his body, so that the ghosts will taste Burger King for Halloween launched a limited edition of white bread burgers. The whole advert has a spooky atmosphere, and despite the negative effects that may be brought about by consumers' resistance to scary adverts, it boldly experiments with horror themes and spooky video presentation styles. Adverts involving the supernatural are not allowed to appear in the Chinese market.

3.3 Power distance (power range)

The power distance of a culture refers to the difference in power distance between members of a society, and this indicator can be regarded as a derivative concept of the difference between individualism and collectivism. Although the characteristics of equality and interactivity in social communication in the new media era can reduce the power distance of a society to a certain extent, in the long run, the Internet media also aggravate the degree of "digital divide", and the technological barriers and the differences in the media literacy of the members of the society expand the power distance of the members of the society in accessing the media and acquiring knowledge, therefore, the power distance of the society in the new media era is shrinking or expanding. In the long run, however, the Internet media have also intensified the degree of "digital divide", and technological barriers and differences in media literacy among members of society have widened the distance between members of society in terms of access to media, knowledge, and so forth.

As far as the characteristics of Chinese and American cultural works are concerned, we can conclude that the social power distance is higher in China, which is represented by the collectivist culture, and lower in the United States, which is represented by the individualist culture. The use of the image of the current national leaders in Chinese and American advertisements and the support of the rights holders in the advertisements can prove the above conclusion: due to the legal regulations and cultural restrictions, the image of the Chinese leaders is never allowed to appear in Chinese advertisements; however, the advertisements in the United States have the right to use the image of the president of the country in power, and it even becomes a laughing stock in the advertisements.

In the United States Apple computer advertisement "*what is on your power book*", former United States Democratic President Bill Clinton looks at the screen of his Apple computer with an extremely unnatural expression. The screen shows an Elvis Presley film, Barbie dolls, and jokes about members of Congress. In the American animated film "*Minions*", Queen Elizabeth II is portrayed in a comical and exaggerated manner. The former US President and the Queen of England are both symbols of power, but American advertisements and films are able to use their images freely, which also reflects the low level of power distance in American culture. American Marlboro cigarettes have set the tone of the brand with the image of western cowboys. However, in the brand's Hong Kong advert, the main character, the rancher, looks down on the cowboys as they drive the horses up the hill, potentially championing the rancher's position of power, which is in line with Chinese cultural values. In addition, Chinese advertisements like to use the image of ancient emperors, which itself is a symbol of high power distance in Chinese feudal society. In the Nine Muses sanitary ware advertisement, Zhang Tielin plays the role of the emperor who finally chooses to use Nine Muses sanitary ware products, symbolising the brand's noble and luxurious temperament, which greatly attracts the attention of Chinese consumers.

4. The Causes of the Problem of Ethical Misconduct in Advertising in China and the United States and Strategies for Responding to the Problem

As a social and cultural phenomenon, advertising has the responsibility to pay attention to social benefits and avoid ethical and moral misconduct in advertisements. The ethical misconduct of advertising in China and the

United States includes not only the problem of ethical and moral contents of advertisements, but also the problem of conflict caused by the misinterpretation and uselessness of other cultures in transnational advertisements.

4.1 The problem of ethical and moral failures in advertising in China and the United States

Tencent Chairman Ma Huateng said in an interview that he would join forces with security guard 360 to compete with Baidu and prepare for the impact of Baidu's medical adverts. Baidu's infomercials contain a lot of false information, which is a huge potential health hazard for Chinese people in the long run. This is also a reflection of China's lack of regulation of Internet advertising, especially infomercials, and the lack of ethical standards for advertising in China. On the one hand, due to the development of productive forces and social reforms, China's modern advertising started late, and many advertising theories are directly translated from foreign literature, and China's advertising industry has not yet formed an imperfect system, although there is also the China Advertising Association (CAA), which is a mechanism to regulate the content of Chinese advertisements, due to the policy environment, the CAA has not yet formed a mechanism to regulate the content of Chinese advertisements. Although China also has the "China Advertising Association" as a mechanism to regulate the content of Chinese advertisements, due to the policy environment and other problems, the actual power and supervision of the China Advertising Association needs to be improved^[8]; on the other hand, the legal regulatory framework of Chinese advertisements as well as the internal censorship mechanism of the media need to be further improved compared with the United States, where the modern advertisement has an earlier start. Against this background, Chinese advertisements are plagued with ethical problems such as false information, over-exaggeration, emotional abuse, and the use of inappropriate advertising methods to attract attention^[9].

Since 2009, research on advertising ethics has been gradually added to the agenda of American academics. In the United States, there are also advertising ethical problems such as false medical advertisements on the Internet, the abuse of junk food in advertisements, the distortion of money values due to the symbolisation of consumerism in advertisements, and gold-digging, etc.^[10]. In this regard, under the dynamic environment of information explosion and rapid information updating.

- (1) The advertising industry should continue to improve the relevant laws and regulations, and clarify the scope of authority and responsibility of the government and advertising regulatory bodies.
- (2) Media organisations should comprehensively monitor ethical misconduct in online advertising through the development of big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence and other technological means, and their staff should strengthen education on advertising ethics.
- (3) The audience of adverts should be constantly aware of reporting.

4.2 Ethical Misinterpretation in Chinese and American Transnational Advertising

For example, Americans regard China's Forbidden City as a place of business that can provide leisure and entertainment services, but in the eyes of the Chinese, the Forbidden City is a sacred and inviolable symbol of traditional Chinese culture. For multinational brand advertisements, respecting the differences in the ethical culture of other countries is an important prerequisite for the localisation and internationalisation of the brand.

In April 2019, an advert released by Burger King in the Chinese market featured a comical image of several customers pinching burgers with giant chopsticks, which was questioned in China for racial discrimination. This is another advert fiasco promoted by a multinational brand in China following Dolce & Gabbana's insult to China. No matter whether Burger King's application of Chinese culture was unintentionally misinterpreted, or whether it was due to its resistance to Chinese culture under cultural hegemony, the essence of this incident is that multinational advertisements are abusing Chinese culture and ignoring the differences between Chinese and American culture and ethics.

Therefore, multinational brand advertisements in the field of cross-cultural communication should follow the following requirements. Firstly, advertisements should respect the differences of different cultures' ethics and avoid the hegemonic concept of self-culture. Secondly, the advertisements should make full use of the empathy effect and promote the concepts common to each culture. For example, the core emotion of IKEA advertisements around the world is basically based on the warm atmosphere among family members. Finally, insist on self-cultural

self-confidence and enhance the international recognition of our own ethical culture.

5. Conclusion

Through the comparative study of advertising ethics and deep culture in China and the United States, it is found that Chinese and American cultures have their own characteristics, which also reflects the positive appearance of the world's cultural diversity. The degree and level of interpretation of cultural ethics in Chinese and American multinational advertisements can directly influence the acceptance of brand localisation and promote the development of brand internationalisation. However, due to the influence of cultural background, the problem of ethical misconduct in advertising in China and the United States is different, and different regulatory strategies should be formulated according to the needs of national conditions.

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