

# A Comparative Study on Cultural Values in Luxury Advertisements\*

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With China's economy speeding up, the continually evolving market of China became the second largest luxury goods market in the world. Luxury brands invest a larger amount of money in advertising every year. This paper tries to analyze the different cultural values reflected in Chinese and Western luxury advertisements based on the theory of Hofstede's value dimensions. We hope that a comparative cultural study on luxury advertisements will enable us to comprehend the main cultural values and enhance the tolerance and mutual understanding between China and the Western countries.

*Keywords:* cultural values, luxury advertisement, cultural differences, comparative study

## Introduction

According to the "Altagamma 2017 Worldwide Luxury Market Monitor", Chinese global luxury consumption amount is sharply booming, accounting for 32% of the global luxury market share. The Chinese consumer has also become the world's top luxury spender. A report from McKinsey in 2017 reveals that Chinese consumers spend in excess of 500 billion yuan annually on luxury commodities. Some people even made a forecast that the market share of China will reach 44% by 2025.

To differentiate from the crowded markets, luxury brands have to invest a large amount of money in advertising and promotion. Zenith's *Luxury Advertising Expenditure Forecasts 2018* reported that the North America, Europe and APAC are the regions contributing most to advertising spend growth. That is to say that advertising plays an essential role in the development of luxury brands. Advertising, as a crucial part of the marketing of luxury brands, also intimately intertwined with culture. Advertisements in diverse cultures contain various cultural elements and demonstrate distinctive cultural values. Therefore, it is of great necessity for advertisers that cultural differences should be taken consideration of in the process of marketing.

## Methodology

In order to make the comparative analysis, more than 100 luxury advertisements from China and Western countries have been collected. The Chinese luxury advertisements are mostly collected from TV channels such

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as CCTV, fashion magazines such as VOGUE and social media such as Weibo and WeChat. Some are selected from the advertisers' websites. And the Western luxury advertisements are mostly collected from the foreign websites such as Google, Instagram and the official website of the luxury brands such as Patek Philippe, Chanel and so on.

The term "advertisement" originates from the Middle French word "avertissement" which means "public notice" or "warning". In Collins English Dictionary, advertisement is defined as the announcement about a product or event that appears on the television, on a poster or in the newspaper. According to American Marketing Association (AMA), an essential community for advertisers, advertisement is "the announcement or persuasive message placed in the mass media in paid or donated time or space by an identified individual, company, or organization". The definition of AMA is similar to the Collins English Dictionary's. From the above definition, advertisement can be comprehended as a method of information transmission. By informing and influencing consumers, advertisers can better convince consumers to purchase their products.

Luxury Advertisement is a special kind of advertisements that only for a few people because of the exclusivity of luxury products. When we talk about luxury brands, we may think of Louis Vuitton, Burberry, Chanel, Lamborghini, Cartier and some other luxury brands. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, luxury is "something adding to pleasure or comfort but not absolutely necessary". Luxury advertising, as a communication channel, is closely related to the purchase intention for luxury products. Freire (2014) gave his definition in his article, he defined it like this: "the advertising message of a luxury product is an image or short film trying to impress the viewer, through an imaged discourse that will lead consumers to completely feel identified with the main personage, in such a way that consumers will desire to acquire that particular luxury object" (Freire, 2014). Additionally, artistic languages are wildly used, which is a peculiar feature of luxury advertisements.

For years, studies on cultural values in different fields have been conducted by scholars to understand the different behaviors of people with various cultures. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory is one of the most popular framework in the field of cross-cultural researches. In 1970s, Hofstede developed his original model, four primary dimensions, based on the Value Survey of IBM employees. In late 1980, after the publication of *Culture's Consequences*, conducted another survey with Micheal Bond, extending the IBM model. A new dimension was created based on the results of this survey. The five dimension of Hofstede's theory are individualism / collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity / femininity, and short-term / long-term orientation.

### **A Comparative Study**

Masculine and feminine are put forward by Hofstede to describe the social, culturally determined roles. In fact, masculine or feminine are not linked to gender differences but the social expectations of people in that society. According to the masculine index (MAS), China and Great Britain scored 66 (ranks 13 through 72) on MAS while the United States scored on 62 (ranks 19). The scores indicate that these countries are similar in this dimension and all belong to masculine countries. Generally, masculine cultures put more emphasis on assertiveness, ambition and status. It seems that people consumer and use luxury goods to achieve societal

acceptance. As a result, the utilitarian appeals in luxury advertisements are more popular in masculine societies. For example:

- (1) “向成功的人生致敬。” (Salute to the successful life!)  
 (8848钛金手机) (8848 Titanium Cellphone)

In this advertisement, a word “成功” (successful) is used. The advertised products are the representative of a high status symbol.

- (2) “Opening the doors to enchantment, the Cartier ateliers work magic on jewelry, recasting previous materials in a potent blend of excellence and rarity.” (Cartier)

The above advertisement uses the words “excellence and rarity” to show the high quality and uniqueness of Cartier’s product. At the same time, the product establishes a relation with success, which makes it tempting to the consumers.

As the Chinese and Western culture share the same value in the masculine dimension, the Western advertising strategies are applicable to Chinese market. The above advertisements both achieve good advertising effects by using the words that show masculine charm. The following advertisement is a good example that Western luxury brands also show the characteristics of masculinity to accommodate Chinese consumers.

- (3) “为真正的荣耀干杯。” (Cheer for the true honor!) (Chivas)

However, there are more differences in the dimension of collectivism vs individualism, and power distance, and long-term orientation vs short-term orientation. For thousands of years, agricultural economy has been the dominant economic force in China. Family, as the basic unit of production in traditional agricultural society, became the smallest power of group that has great impact on Chinese culture. The importance of family is one of the significant values in Chinese culture, many of which are the distinctive features of collectivism in Chinese society. Therefore, people will devote themselves to and place a priority on the interests of group instead of personal ones.

In addition, Confucian ideas have influenced Chinese people to today as a kind of moral guide for people’s behaviors. Confucianism promotes societal order and harmony. To reach social harmony, people tend to retain a neutral position and a good relationship to the group, whether to family, friends, or country. These values are so remarkably persistent that even in modern Chinese society, the idea of keeping themselves in the middle is very common. Consequently, the spirit of collectivism will be put into the advertisements. For example:

- (4) “坐红旗车，走中国路。” (Drive in a Hong Qi automobile on the way of China!)  
 (红旗汽车) (Hong Qi Auto)
- (5) “茅台王子酒，王子尊天下。” (Maotai Prince Liquor, a highest prince in the world.)  
 (茅台) (Maotai Group)

- (6) “开启时，我回味醇香；  
 珍藏时，我注重文化；  
 欢聚时，我感受分享；  
 好酒，从来无须多言。”

(When it’s open, we can smell the fragrance; when we cherish it, we hold the culture; when we gather, we are sharing; the liquor of good quality is beyond any kind of words.) (五粮液) (Wuliangye Group)

In these advertisements, the concepts of group are emphasized. The phrase “中国” in the first advertisement belongs to the largest group, country, which is the core spirit of Chinese civilization. “天下” can be interpreted as “the world” or “the whole society” in Maotai’s advertisement, which reflects the respect for the collectivity. The last advertisement gives consumers a hint that this product is very suitable for gatherings to improve interpersonal relationship. These expressions correspond to the Chinese traditional values and make people feel a sense of collective pride. In this way, these advertisements succeed in attracting potential consumers.

However, the image of Western cultures is associated with the concept of individualism. Western culture is formed on the basis of the Greek culture and attaches importance to personal time, freedom and personal interest. The westerners put individual above the group, emphasizing the value of “I” identity. Moreover, they are likely to have an independent view of themselves. Therefore, the value of individualism can be reflected in luxury advertisements. Advertisers will stress self-centered individualism and the uniqueness of their products. For example:

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|--|------------------|
| (7) “Begin your own tradition.”                                    | (Patek Philippe) |
| (8) “Show yourself some love with CHANEL.”                         | (Chanel)         |
| (9) “Follow your instincts. Free your wild side.”                  | (Cartier)        |
| (10) “In order to be irreplaceable, one must always be different.” | (Chanel)         |

The above luxury advertisements reflect a strong individualism by using the words “your”, “yourself” and “different”. Advertisers attempt to make their consumers believe that they will become special after using their products. The Western luxury advertisements perfectly demonstrate the independent view and emphasize the concept of individuality.

According to Hofstede, population and wealth are the predictors of a country’s power distance index score. The country with small population and more wealth tends to have a smaller power distance. In general, China belongs to large power distance cultures while the Western countries belong to small power distance.

Confucianism, the guideline for people’s behaviors, advocated the unequal relationships between people in order to maintain harmony. The following relationships are emphasized: ruler and subject, father and son, the senior and the junior, husband and wife. This system of interdependent relationships extends from the family level to national. For this reason, Chinese culture highlights the class of identity and gives copious amount of reverence for authority. As a result, in advertising, the method of stressing authority is commonly used. Consumer’s purchase decisions will be influenced by the amount of honor the product won and the status symbols embodied in advertising. So in Chinese advertisements, this authority strategy has a persuasive effect on consumers. Examples are as follows:

- (11) “8848钛金手机，携手瑞士独立制表师学会，潜心雕琢，打造全新M5。10位享有盛誉的制表师们，将巧思与精湛技艺，融入M5独有的时间眼内，令腕表的奢华呈现于手机之上。”  
(8848 Titanium Cellphone, working hard with the Swiss Independent Watch Designers Association, forged the brand-new M5. 10 prestigious watch experts integrate their thoughts and technique into the time eye of M5, to make it as luxurious as a watch.) (8848钛金手机8848) (Titanium Cellphone)

This advertisement mention the experts in the industry to prove that the advertised products are in good quality. By mentioning the experts, the products are more authoritative and attractive to the consumers.

However, in small power distance countries, people are relatively independent of the power holder and equal to each other. As a majority of Western countries belong to small power distance cultures, westerners strive for power equalization and pay attention to practical considerations instead of authority. As a consequence, advertisers rarely praise the products but stress the practicability and the functions of them. The information that consumers get from the advertisements is the statistical data from experiments and tests. For example:

(12) “Perfected over 12 years, after nearly 6000 experiments, this transformative process produced cell-renewing Miracle Broth-the elixir that soothed his skin and flows through every La Mer product today.” (Lamer)

(13) “15 years of professional pioneering cells study, 19 patents, and 25 times Beauty Awards.” (Dior Capture Totale)

(14) “A brand new oyster perpetual, the sky-dweller, a new classic, with two time zones and an annual calendar, a revolutionary interface, the ring command, the simple way to set, home time, date time and local time, Another legendary timepiece, truly compelling.” (ROLEX)

Number 12 and number 13 advertisements utilize the specific number “12 years” and “15 years” to give evidence that the advertised products are safe and effective. The last advertisement demonstrates the innovative functions of the product. With the presented statistics and practical function of the products, advertisements become more compelling.

According to long-term orientation index, China has the highest score among 23 countries, which is 118, while most western countries like Great Britain and the United States scored relatively low. The long-time oriented dimension is related to some Confucian values. As China is a country which profoundly influenced by Confucianism, it makes sense that China has a long term orientation. Therefore, Chinese people are more likely to concern about long-term benefits and make plans for the future. For example:

(15) “全身披钻，精巧华丽，它为你们脸上彼此的讯号，让真挚爱情驶向未来。”

(Covered with diamonds, luxurious and delicate, it marks the signal on your faces, and leads the true love to the future.) (麒麟珠宝) (Qilin Jewelry)

(16) “面向未来，面对挑战，不忘初心，继续前行。”

(Facing the future, facing the challenge, we carry with the original purpose, and keep moving on.) (茅台) (Maotai Group)

In the above advertisements, the phrase “未来” (future) shows that Chinese people care more about their future rather than the joy of a moment.

The low score of LTO for Great Britain and the United States indicates that people in western countries emphasize short term orientation and concern more about the present and the past. In fact, western cultures encourage hedonism. As a result, individuals from western cultures tend to put more emphasis on short-term benefits and immediate need gratification. For this reason, western luxury advertisements are about “living for the moment” and respecting tradition. For example:

(17) “The world outside no longer passes you by. You are living every second of it.” (Rolls Royce Dawn)

From the above advertisement, words “living every second of it” show that the product enable the driver to have a unique driving experience. It can be inferred that drivers can enjoy the pleasure of the journey without missing the scenery outside the window.

(18) “This is the CHIVAS life.” (Chivas)

This advertisement suggests that the product of Chivas can improve the quality of life and bring instant enjoyment to the consumers. The idea of “living for the moment” is fully embodied.

### Transitions of Values in Chinese Cultural Context

Due to the enormous gap between the value orientation of China and western countries, Chinese consumers may have difficulties in accurately understanding the information of advertisements from the international companies. Therefore, it is common for international luxury brands to adapt localized strategies to best satisfy local consumer needs. Here are some example to show how international luxury brands inject Chinese cultural values into their advertisements.

#### Collectivism

Chinese people tend to see themselves as connected to others and attach importance to family. They value the connection with others and family because they care about their roles in a group. So western advertisers who want to enter the Chinese market start to put emphasis on the relationships with others. In the following advertisements of the international brands, the concept of family is stressed. They try to give a hint to the Chinese consumer that the products can bring happiness and make them feel close to their family.

(19) “佳人变成家人，明年赏月，因为有它，更圆满，还在等什么呢。”

(The beauty becomes your family. The moon next year will be rounder because of it. What are you waiting for?) (Leysen, 1855)

(20) “Trinity三环相连，见证家人的每个记忆，化作亲情中温暖的幸福。”

(Trinity three rings connected, to witness every moments of each members, and become the warmth and happiness of the family.) (Cartier)

(21) “亲情是时尚风格里最真实的灵魂伴侣，古驰猪猪家族帮你展现亲密家人之间的搭配风格，在新的一年里带来率性纯真的一面。”

(Family bond is the true soulmate of the fashion. The Gucci Piggy family can help with your clothing style of the families, and show the purity in the new year.) (Gucci)

#### Power Distance

Some western luxury brands notice that authority is highly recognized by Chinese consumers. Therefore, when advertising in China, power and authority are highlighted by mentioning the experts in this field. In the following advertisement, the phrases “doctor”, another kind of power worship, is used to show the quality of products can be guaranteed by professionals.

(22) “海洋灵感的深深启迪，贺伯博士利用天然生物性发酵技术，将蕴含强大修护力的深海巨藻与多种天然矿植物营养成分精纯融合。”

(Inspired by the ocean, Dr. Herber applied natural biological fermentation technology, and mixed healing deep sea giant algae with nutrients of various natural mineral plants.) (La Mer)

### Long-term Orientation

In order to achieve a long-term goal in a long-term oriented country, international brands would use soft sell to promote their products instead of hard sell which are commonly used to create immediacy buying. Consequently, cross-cultural advertisers will emphasize perseverance and thrift when advertising in long-term oriented culture. For example:

(23) “心所向，驰以恒。”

(The heart leads to, we follow it forever.)

(Mercedes-Benz)

The word “恒” means perseverance in English. The advertisement conveys a message that the product and the brand of Benz are striving for the best by following the aspiration with constant perseverance. Advertiser uses this brand proposition with rich connotation to impress the consumers.

(24) “一念在后，佑我向前。”

(The conviction gives me strength to move on.)

(Jaeger-LeCoultre)

The phrase literally means “the conviction gives me strength to move on”. It can be understood that spirit of Jaeger-LeCoultre is consumers’ support to the unknown future.

### Suggestions for Advertisers

Through more than 100 years of development, the world luxury industry has become the driving force of the sales growth in global fashion industry and one of the most important sectors of the world economy. The global luxury industry, which covers the sectors of jewelry, watches, drinks, fragrances and so on, has been on an upward trend for years. The total revenues were 295.9 billion dollars in 2017.

Although the United States remains the largest regional market for luxury goods and generates the most revenue, China also starts to act as the linchpin in the global luxury market. According to a report by McKinsey & Company, China becomes the world’s fastest-growing consumer market, accounting for more than 18 percent of all final goods consumed. In 2012, China even outstripped Japan and became the second largest luxury market.

Therefore, how the advertisers merchandise the luxury brands and commodities becomes particularly essential. So, there are two suggestions to the advertisers who engage in intercultural business.

#### First, Try to Understand the Target Consumer Market

It is absolutely crucial that advertisers take environmental elements of the target consumer market into consideration, if an advertisement wants to achieve a satisfactory effect. Knowing the market status of a consumer market plays a pivotal role in implementing advertising strategy. In China, consumers have a preference for online retailers over physical stores. Digital becomes a big part of the luxury industry in China, growing at triple the rate of the overall market. For this reason, the use of creative advertising campaign activities through online platforms is indispensable. While in United States, department stores maintain dominance in source for luxury purchases. Western retailers who try to apply home rules to the Chinese market by establishing their own stand-alone shopping sites often meet with disappointing sales results. Recently,

Dolce & Gabbana was accused of racism because of its new advertising which showed the model eating Italian pizza and spaghetti with chopsticks. These cultural symbols and elements which were outdated and stereotypical were mistakenly incorporated into design. As a result, D&G is estimated to lose half a billion dollars from this fallout. Accordingly, advertisers should investigate the consumer market thoroughly and consider their audience carefully to have a better advertising effect.

### **Second, Being Harmonious with the Cultural Environment**

Every ethnic group has its own perspectives and values and our environments are becoming more culturally diverse. For example, people from different cultures will focus on different appeals of the advertisement. In luxury consumption, western consumers place more emphasis on independent self concept and hedonic experience while Asian consumers will place a greater importance on interdependence self concept and use the products to symbolize their location within the socioeconomic hierarchy. (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998) The advertising message in the East and the West would be dramatically different. When we acquire scraps of information from TV or magazine advertisements, we may easily carry misinformation about the products from different cultures. If a product is marketed at intercultural audience, the same domestic advertising campaign abroad is mostly ineffective. Therefore, cross cultural advertisements should base on mutual understanding and maintain harmonious relationship through respect. When producing intercultural advertisements, advertisers should examine these cultural values to avoid conflict and best speak to the target audience.

### **Conclusion**

Nowadays, plethora of advertising can be seen via various mediums like outdoor, print, TV and online. Since culture affects all areas of human life, advertisement in most cases reflect the existing cultural values. Moreover, having a good understanding of the values in the target culture is essential. Therefore, it is of great necessity to conduct a study on the field of cultural aspects embodied in advertisement. By comparing a number of Chinese and western luxury advertisements, we find that Chinese culture basically follows collectivism, large power distance and long term orientation. In contrast, western culture values are individualism, small power distance and short term orientation. In terms of the dimension of masculinity, the two cultures share the similarity.

However, it should be noted that advertising strategies need to change as the cultural environment changes. For example, when international companies advertise in China, they must pay attention to the value orientation in the context of Chinese culture. Only in this way can the advertisements be effective.

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