

MASTER'S THESIS

Tread along the line between edgy and offensive: a study of Chinese students' response toward offensive advertising

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**Tread Along The Line Between Edgy and Offensive:
A Study of Chinese Students' Response toward
Offensive Advertising**

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ABSTRACT

Heated discussion on offensive advertising was seen on a rise in Mainland China. International brands, such as McDonald's, Nippon Paint, Toyota, and Nike, etc. attracted extensive yet negative media coverage simply for the advertisements. The potential pitfalls for advertisers who try to make their marks in China seem to be endless. Conventional wisdom in advertising believes that a certain amount of irritation will enhance the effectiveness of an ad (Prendergast & Ho, 2002). In order to cut through the increasingly clustered advertising environment, some advertisers tend to design messages that violate common expectations and/or arouse controversies. However, it's hard to draw a clear line between edgy and offensive, especially in a high-context culture such as China, where communication messages are often embedded with implicit meanings. Advertisers should always be cautious because what catches attention is usually what arouses aversion among consumers.

Literature suggests that offensive advertising should be defined as any advertising message that violates the norms of consumers at large. The scope and objective of the current study discussed only advertising executions that violate Chinese cultural values. The research framework attempts to measure associations between Chinese consumers' value orientations concerning four social relationships, [i.e., Male-female, Family, Authority hierarchy, and Patriotism (person-state)], and their perception and reaction toward potentially offensive advertisements.

Two hundred and seventy-seven university students in Shanghai were recruited for the survey study and among which, twenty-eight were randomly selected for subsequent interviews (twelve face-to-face interviews and three focus group interviews). Results demonstrated that cultural values were significant predictors to

consumers' perceptions of offensive advertisements, though in a way more complex than the proposed model. For example, family values rather than values concerning male-female relationship were associated with perceptions of ads violating male-female relationship. Demographics explained small portion of the variance of perceptions, as well as discuss intention toward the ad and purchase intention toward the product and the brand. Detailed examination of the findings drew out other research and marketing implications. It is suggested that consumers' perceptions be manifold, and the level of offensiveness can be alleviated with the presence of matter-manner congruence, as well as careful use of sex appeals and national heroes.

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