

Understanding of public service advertisements among Chinese Children

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Understanding of public service advertisements among Chinese Children

Kara Chan and Anqi Huang

Abstract

This chapter reviews results of recent studies about children and youths' understanding of advertising in general and social marketing communication in Hong Kong and China. It reports how children and youth perceive the purpose of social service marketing, the comprehension of key messages in selected public service advertisements, and the criteria in differentiating social marketing from marketing of a commercial nature. These studies include both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. Children and youth's interpretation of two government publicity campaigns on green living and food waste reduction were used as case studies to illustrate factors that contributed to an effective communication. The chapter ends with an elaborated discussion of how public service advertising was created and managed in Hong Kong through the Information Services Department. The chapter provides insights for social services marketing in communication to children and youth in Hong Kong.

Understanding of Public Service Advertisements among Chinese Children

Social marketing uses the principles and processes of commercial marketing to promote socially beneficial behavior change (Evans, 2006). Because nearly all societies are keen to socialize new members (e.g. their children), children are a major target audience of social marketing. Social marketing usually involves the promotion of abstract ideas, rather than concrete products and services; thus, it is natural to ask if children understand these messages. At what age will they begin to be interested in social marketing communications? How does this interest develop with time? What forms of social marketing communication appeal most to children? This book chapter attempts to answer these questions.

1. Children's responses to advertising in general and public service advertising

Most researchers in developmental psychology agree that a child's ability to acquire cognitive reasoning progresses through a series of distinct stages (John, 1999; Piaget, 1970; Selman, 1980). Based on Piaget's (1970) stage theory of cognitive development and Selman's (1980) stage theory of social development, John (1999) proposes a model of consumer socialization. The model proposes that children learn to become a consumer through the perceptual stage (ages 3-7), the analytical stage (ages 7-11), and the reflective stage (ages 11-16). Using John's (1999) theoretical framework and

empirical evidence from a survey of 1,758 children in China, Chan (2014)

summarizes children's responses to television advertising at different stages.

At the perceptual stage, children do not have a clear understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising. They are usually aware that advertising wants them to buy the product featured in the commercial or tell their parents about it. However, they seldom have a clear picture about why television stations broadcast these messages (for example, some young children think that the commercials occur in television in order to give audience a break from watching the program). Also, for the most part, they believe that advertising is mainly or mostly true. Furthermore, they often have strong views about advertising, whether positive or negative. The advertising appeals they like the best are humor and animations.

At the analytical stage, over a third of children are able to understand that advertising promotes products. However, unlike the previous age group, most children in the analytical stage perceive that only about half of the advertising is true. Too, do not have such strong views about advertising: some still like advertising a lot, but others now have more neutral views on it. Also, while these children still enjoy funny ads and animated ads, they now begin to show appreciation of public service advertisements, which the majority of them perceive as more meaningful than other advertisements. Comparatively speaking, children in this stage have a more

sophisticated understanding of advertising than children in the previous stage.

When children reach the reflective stage, most of them are able to identify the persuasive intent of advertising. Like the previous age group, children in the reflective stage perceive that half of the television commercials are truthful. However, by now most of them have become desensitized: they neither like nor dislike television advertising, and they are no longer interested in animated ads. But they still love funny advertisements. Furthermore, most of them show appreciation of public service advertising, such as social service advertisements about environmental protection, which they still believe is meaningful (Chan, 2014). Notice that the model shows that children's understanding and liking of public service advertisement progresses with age.

A study using face-to-face interviews with a structured questionnaire was conducted among 448 children aged 5 to 12 in Hong Kong (Chan, 2000). It was found that by ages 7 to 8, children would begin to understand what advertising was and were aware of the persuasive intention of television advertising. These results provide empirical supports of John's (1999) model of consumer socialization. The deciding factor in the interviewees' responses to advertisements was the entertainment element. The study showed a few television commercials and asked respondents to recall the key messages of those commercials. Two of these commercials were public service

advertisements. The first was developed by the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department to promote liquefied petroleum gas as a cleaner form of energy for taxis by featuring taxi drivers who claimed that gas fuel would create a better environment for pedestrians. Less than one third of the respondents were able to demonstrate full understanding of the advertisement. Some reported that the advertisement was about the use of unleaded fuel, while some misunderstood it to be an advertisement advocating the drivers to turn off their engines when their vehicles were not in use. Chan (2000) attributed the confusion to the fact that children were unfamiliar with driving or choice of fuel.

Chan (2000) found that public service advertisements were able to communicate well with younger children when they were presented in a child-friendly manner. A television public service advertisement produced by Civic Education Committee about human right reported an overall 63 percent of full understanding among all respondents and 27 percent of full understanding among children studying in kindergarten or grade 1 (ages 6 to 7). This advertisement featured an animated girl and an animated boy. The girl said that she wanted to be a doctor when she grew up. When the boy said that she could not be a doctor, the girl replied that if she had the competence, she could make it. The voice-over reassured that boys and girls both have the human right of choosing their occupation. The closing scene showed a boy

and a girl with an equal sign between them. Chan (2000) suggested that a straightforward narration and a concrete example of how the human right was being challenged contributed to the successful communication to the children target (Chan, 2000).

A qualitative study was conducted to examine older children and youths' perceptions of public service advertisements in Hong Kong (Chan, 2010). In this study, 32 Chinese adolescents aged 14 to 16 were recruited to participate in a face-to-face interview. Most interviewees reported that they distinguished between public service advertisements and commercial advertisements mainly through the ad's persuasive intent. They perceived that public service advertisements were messages not for making money, while advertisements for goods and services were messages for profit. Some interviewees also perceived that public service advertisements were educational, informative, and meaningful in nature. Government departments, non-profit organizations, and charity groups were identified by the interviewees as major sources of social marketing communication. When asked about what these messages want people to do, most of the interviewees reported that these messages want people to follow the featured actions or to adopt the advocated attitudes. In general, these young consumers demonstrated positive attitude toward public service advertisements, and most of them believed these messages. Most of them reported

that their trust was based on the credibility of the government as the source of communication. Some believed these messages because they perceived that these messages were meaningful. Three interviewees reported that they believed these messages because the messages were close to what they saw in their daily lives. However, a few interviewees did not believe the public service advertisements because they found the persuasive messages exaggerated or far from reality. One interviewee in particular criticized a public service advertisement advocating that “Learning is not about getting high scores”. Based on her own real life experience, she believed that the point of education was to compete with others and move ahead by means of good scores. She concluded that the government was telling them lies (Chan, 2010).

The study also found that young people paid attention to details of public service advertisements. They were most interested in the characters portrayed in the advertisements, the scripts and the story, the celebrities featured, the music, and the slogan. They also liked some of the public service ads because of the entertainment value, personal relevance, creativity and visuals. For instance, one interviewee enjoyed an advertisement with the slogan “Love your teeth, start flossing” that featured Ah Sa (a popular pop singer and artist) with a giant tooth. He found it creative, trendy, having good sound effect, and easy to remember (Chan, 2010).

When being asked about advertising executions often used in the public service ads on television, interviewees most frequently reported use of celebrities, slice-of-life dramas, and slogans. An interviewee recalled without effort six celebrities appearing in a public service ad, including three local popular singers and two prominent government officials. However, not all persuasive campaigns were appreciated by children and youth. Interviewees in a study to examine two government television advertisements promoting green living reported mixed views (Chan and Chang, 2013). A majority of the 37 interviewees reported that they found the green living ads enjoyable, refreshing, and visually stimulating. However, some interviewees found the same two ads unrealistic, irrelevant, and unimpressive. Chan and Chang (2013) suggested that to encourage the young target audience to practice a desired behavior using public service advertisements, the social marketers should use visual images, music, and appealing characters to evoke desirable emotions and to arouse a sense of personal relevance. According to them, the social message would also need to spell out how to achieve the advocated end-state; only when the audience is empowered with the perceived competence would they be motivated to carry out the specified behavior (Chan and Chang, 2013).

A recent study was conducted to examine Hong Kong children's understanding and comprehension of public service advertisements broadcasted on TV in October

2013. A quota sample of 31 children aged between 7 and 12 studying in elementary school grades 2 to 6 were personally interviewed. Two APIs (“Announcements in the Public Interest”; one on anti-drug abuse, one on social inclusion) were shown to interviewees. In the first API on anti-drug abuse, the serious consequences of taking thinner and cough medicine such as rotten teeth and loss of bladder control were shown. The API featured children aged around 10 to 12 as its central characters. The voiceover of this API says:

“Not only can he not walk straight...

“Not only does she break out in cold sweats...

“Not only has her pulse rate shot up...

“Not only is he slow to react ...

“Not only are her teeth rotting...

“But her brain is also damaged

“Do you still want to abuse thinner and cough medicine?

“Stand firm! Knock Drugs Out!” (Information Services Department, 2010)

The other API included in the study was about social inclusion. The API featured characters of different race, age, and gender. They urged the public to respect different

values and lifestyles. The narration of this API reads as follows:

Man: "Respect - it's easy

"Mutual understanding and accommodation

Indian girl: "We all think differently but accept each other for who we are

Pop girl: "Trendy style – no problem!

Old man: "Thank you, young man!

"And they don't mind if I'm a little clumsy

Wife: "It's best when people truly understand me

Voiceover: "Want to be respected? Try respecting others first

Old woman:

"Don't mind me when I laugh out loud!" (Information Services Department, 2013d)

This public service advertisement obviously was not targeting children, as its narration was adult-oriented. Interviewees were asked to report the key message of these two advertisements. They were also asked to describe the differences between these public service messages and the advertisements of commercial nature such as an advertisement of toothpaste or an advertisement of candy.

Results indicated that children's understanding of the social message on

anti-drug was much higher than that of the social message on social inclusion. Among the 31 interviewees, 23 were able to identify the key message of the anti-drug abuse API. They reported that illegal drugs are harmful to their bodies, or that people should not take drugs. Seven of them had a partial understanding of the anti-drug abuse API. They remarked that people should not take medicine too casually. One interviewee was not able to identify the key messages of the API. On the other hand, only 12 of the 31 interviewees were able to identify the key message of the social inclusion API. They reported that people should show respect to one another. A further 17 interviewees had a partial understanding of the social inclusion API. Some of them perceived that the message advocated respectful behavior toward seniors. The remaining two interviewees were unable to tell the key message of the API.

The significant gap between the understandings of the two API can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the anti-drug abuse messages were concrete and direct, while the social inclusion message was vague and fragmented. Secondly, the drug API featured children characters throughout and would be more likely to attract the attention of children and youth. The social inclusion API features six adults and is less likely to appeal to the young audience. Thirdly, some interviewees reported that they received similar messages about anti-drug abuse from parents and school teachers. A few interviewees mentioned that the API on anti-drug abuse was shown in the class to

educate them to stay away from drug. However, none of the interviewees reported that they were exposed to inclusive practices messages in families or at schools.

Furthermore, it was found that children distinguish social messages and commercial messages based on intention of the messages as well as the execution strategies of the advertisements. Out of 31 interviewees, 20 reported that public service advertisements are messages that attempt to teach, educate, change attitudes, or evoke action, while commercial messages were about promoting products to make money. Another eight interviewees distinguished between the two types of messages by the execution styles. They commented that commercial messages were funny while public service advertising was longer, scarier, closer to daily life, and less entertaining. The remaining three interviewees were unable to tell the difference between the two types of persuasive messages.

2. “Big Waster” and the Food Wise Hong Kong Campaign

Cartoon characters and jingles are often used in public service advertising to appeal to children. In this section, we feature a successful social marketing campaign that used such methods and captured the hearts of children. With its immensely popular cartoon character “Big Waster”, Food Wise Hong Kong Campaign is considered as one of the most successful social marketing campaigns developed by the Hong Kong

government in May 2013 (Information Services Department, 2013c). As a wealthy city, Hong Kong people create large amounts of food waste. Statistics shows that food makes up 40 percent of the municipal solid waste that goes to the landfills every day (Information Services Department, 2013b). Most of this food waste is generated by households, while the rest largely comes from the commercial sectors (Information Services Department, 2013b). The Food Wise Campaign was developed to promote public awareness of food waste in the community. It encourages Hong Kong people to think before they buy or order food.

A central character “Big Waster” (Figure 1) and a 30-second television commercial with a rap song were designed. The “Big Waster” had a giant drooling head, a pair of broad eyes and a tiny body with a narrow waist line. It is used to represent individuals who purchase more food than they can stomach. Many children enjoy the ad. Some of them are keen to recite the entire rap song. Some kids even create their own dance with the song. According to the creative director who shot the advertisement, “The “Big Waster” is not a bad guy. It just has some bad habits.” The creative director remarked that the audience finds it easy to identify with the “Big Waster”. This is because most of the Hong Kong people have the experience of throwing away expired food simply because they have bought too much food at the supermarket (Information Services Department, 2013a).

Figure 1. Big Waster Poster



The lyrics of the rap song read:

“Your eyes are bigger than your stomach

“You're a Big Waster!”

Rapper:

“Hey, you can't finish

“Why order so much, man

“Leftovers are such a waste!

“Yo! Yo!

“So many dishes

“Who's gonna finish them?

“All this food into the rubbish bin

“What a waste!”

Backing: “Don't waste, don't waste”

Rapper:

“Buy, buy, buy

“All the food expires

“Then, bye, bye, bye

“It's all thrown away!

“Order only portions you can finish

“Buy only what you need

“Please be conscious

“Stop the waste

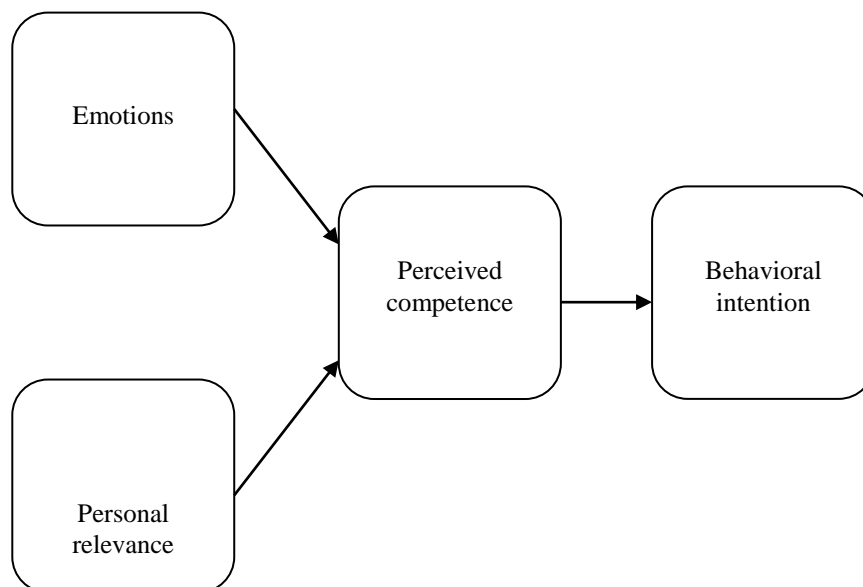
“Everything is precious

“Let's be Food Wise!” (Food Wise Hong Kong, 2014)

The Big Waster’s visual image, icon, the rap song, and the light-hearted approach have won wide acceptance for the advertisement, especially among children. The ad’s slogan of “Think before you buy food; Think before you order food” have become popular sayings in the community. To extend the impact of the campaign, the fictional character visited elementary schools and was heartily welcomed (Information Services Department, 2013a).

Using Chan and Chang’s (2013) conceptual model of social marketing (see Figure 2), we have the following analysis.

Figure 2. A conceptual model of how public service advertising work



Source: Chan and Chang (2013); **used by permission**

The unique visual icon of the “Big Waster” and the rap song together create the emotions of fun, excitement, and a subtle taste of mockery. The situations that lead to food waste in daily life create the sense of personal relevance. Also, the encouraged behavior of reducing food waste at its source does not involve a high level of skills or competency; it merely requires commitment and awareness. These three factors together contributed to the positive reception of the “Big Waster” advertisement among children and youth.

3. The Making of Public service Advertising in Hong Kong

Most public service advertisements in Hong Kong are created with the assistance of the Information Services Department. In this section, we introduce the process of creation of the public service advertisements and discuss how the creative process may affect its communication with children and youth.

The Information Services Department, a department of the Hong Kong Government, is responsible for providing a communication link between the government and the people through newspapers, television, radio, magazines, and other media (Information Services Department, 2014a). The Information Services Department aims at enhancing public understanding of government policies, decisions and activities through various media contents, publicity and advertising. It has four

divisions: Local Public Relations, Publicity and Promotions, Public Relations outside Hong Kong, and Administration. The Publicity and Promotions Division is responsible for government publications, promotional campaigns, advertisements, creative and design work, and government photography (Information Services Department, 2014a). It serves as the government's publicity adviser, serving various government departments and bureaus in designing and executing local publicity campaigns (Information Services Department, 2014a).

In Hong Kong, the public service advertising handled by the Information Services Department has a special name called "Announcements in the Public Interests", APIs for short. It represents announcements to provide information that the public needs to know (Wong, 2006). The production of each API is funded by government departments or bureaus. These messages are related to issues of public concern such as health, safety, social welfare, legal obligations, availability of public resources, and changes affecting environmental factors. They are directly related to government policy or operational objectives (Information Services Department, 2013c). The design and production of APIs are normally contracted out to private advertising and media companies. The Information Services Department works closely with other government departments, working groups, and committees in designing campaign themes and execution strategies (Wong, 2006). Information

Services Department personnel are involved in the preparation of documents inviting quotation, selecting ad agencies for production, liaison on production logistics with client bureaus and departments, management of the approval process and allocation of air time for broadcasting of APIs (Information Services Department, 2013c). Among the mass media, television is considered the most effective medium for delivering messages to the public (Wong, 2006). Hong Kong's licensing regulations oblige the three local commercial television broadcasting licensees and two local commercial radio broadcasting licensees to broadcast one minute of APIs every hour free of charge. With the free airtime, APIs on television are known to make significant social impact (Chan, 2010).

As at June 2014, there are 18 publicity campaigns of different themes broadcast in the television media. Table 1 lists these themes in alphabetical order (Information Services Department, 2014 b). Among them, at least twelve are of concern to children and youth. However, most such publicity campaigns do not employ age segmentation strategy. In other words, it is rare to find a publicity campaign developed on a single key message but with different executions, each aiming at a different age segment. Take the promotion of social inclusion ideas among children and youth as an example. In recent two years, there is an influx of elementary school children from Mainland China. Some schools also have race diversity of student profiles. Many children have

day-to-day encounter with classmates from a different culture. A mutual understanding and respect is important to these school children. Therefore, there is a need to introduce the idea of social inclusion among children. The public service advertisement in place is not sufficient to cater to the cognitive level and tastes of children. According to the government's audit report, the Information Services Department was criticized of lack of yardsticks to measure the effectiveness of the publicity campaigns in terms of awareness, attitude/behavioral change and participation. Some publicity campaign did not set any performance targets for the communication effects (Audit Commission, 2011)

4. Conclusion

To conclude, children have a good understanding of public service advertisements in Hong Kong. They can identify the key messages of the public service advertisements using straight forward and child-friendly narration. However, audience research indicates that not all public service advertisements communicate well with youth and children. Hong Kong citizens in general and children and youth thereof in particular are fond of creative stories, funny characters, and social issues of high personal relevance. There is a need for social marketers to measure the effectiveness of public service advertisements using interviews or surveys. These social messages will be

more effective when they are discussed or elaborated in details in the family or school contexts.

Biography of authors

Dr Kara Chan (Ph.D., City University of Hong Kong) is Professor at the School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University. She worked in the advertising profession and as a statistician for the Hong Kong Government before she joined the academia. Her research areas are about cross cultural consumer studies, consumer socialization, and health communication. She has published over 120 journal articles and book chapters. She is the co-author of *Advertising to Children in China* (Chinese University Press, 2004) and author of *Youth and Consumption* (City University of Hong Kong Press, 2010) as well as *Girls and Media: Dream and Realities* (City University of Hong Kong Press, 2014). She was a Fulbright Scholar at Bradley University, Illinois and Visiting Professor at the Copenhagen Business School as well as Aarhus University. Her journal articles on adolescents and healthy eating had won four Emerald Literati Network Awards for Excellence.

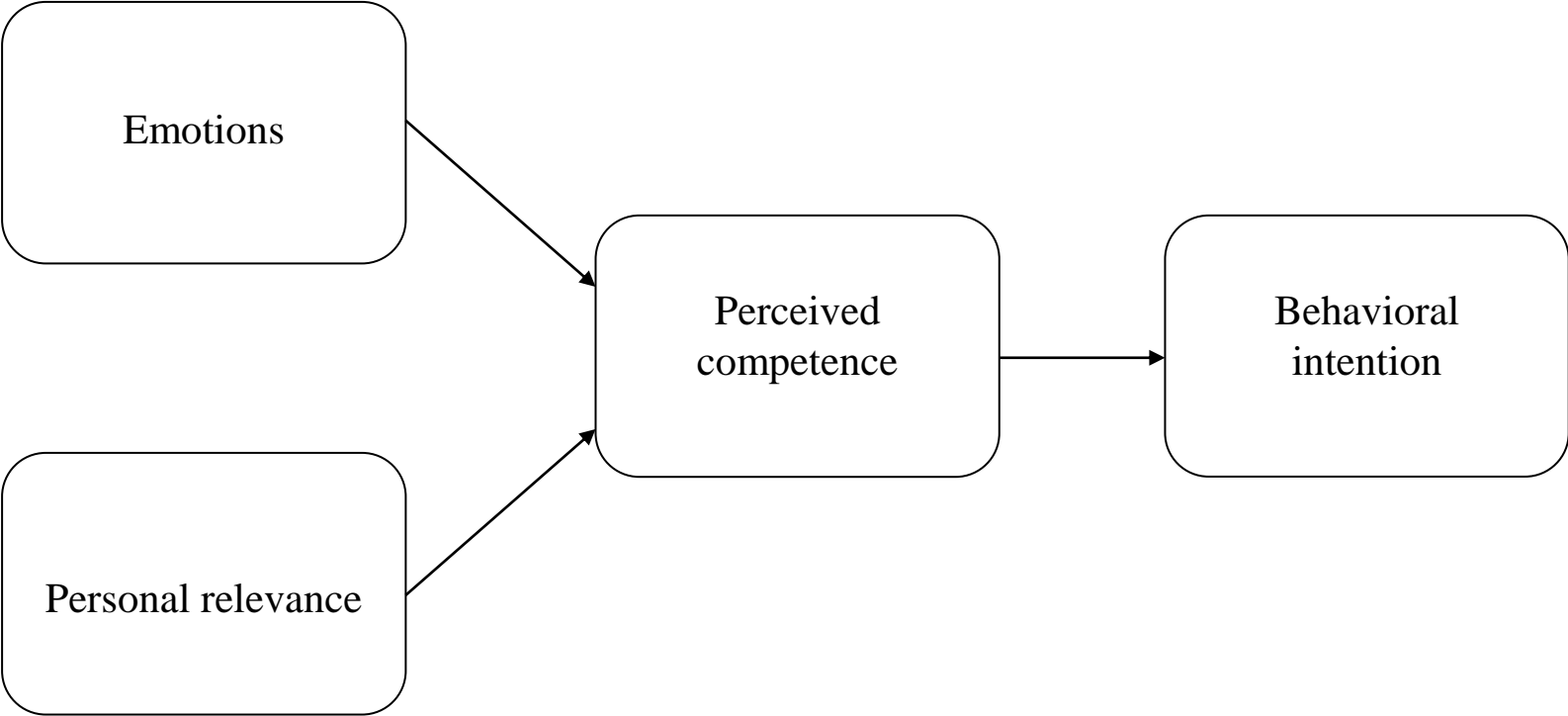
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Figure 1. Big Waster Poster



Use by permission of Environmental Protection Department

Figure 2. A conceptual model of how public service advertising work



Source: Chang and Chang (2013); **seeking permission**

Table 1. Government's TV publicity campaigns by themes

Anti-drug*

Basic Law and Constitutional Development

Civic Education*

Clean Hong Kong*

Fight Crime*

Education*

Environmental Protection*

Family*

Fire Prevention

Health and Hygiene*

Home Safety and Building Management

Hospitality

Information Technology*

Intellectual Property Rights*

Labour Relations, Employment and Occupational Safety

Road Safety and Transport*

Volunteering*

Others

*Campaigns with children and youth as one the target groups

(Information Services Department, 2014b)

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