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Advertising to Chinese youth: A study of public service ads in Hong Kong

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Research paper

Structured abstract

Purpose –Hong Kong youth’s general attitudes toward government publicity were studied and their responses to two public service advertisements promoting green lifestyles were measured.

Design/methodology/approach –Thirty-four Chinese youths in Hong Kong aged 17 to 22 were questioned about their understanding of and attitudes toward public service advertising in face-to-face interviews. Their opinions of two government television ads promoting “green living” were then solicited.

Findings –The interviewees described government publicity in general as credible and practical. Some liked the green living ads for their creativity but others disliked them as boring, unrealistic, irrelevant and uninformative. Recommendations are presented for designing public service campaigns that target youth.

Research limitations/implications – The results were based on a small convenience sample. More than one interviewer participated, so the results were subject to differences in interviewing techniques.

Practical implications – The study developed useful information for those organizing public service ad campaigns, especially campaigns aimed at Chinese youth.

Originality/value – This has been the first study to measure youth’s attitudes toward public service ad campaigns in the Hong Kong context.

Key words: Social marketing, public service advertising, qualitative research, interviews, behavioral change

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Introduction

Like other developed societies, Hong Kong suffers from various pollution problems. The government and Hong Kong people have begun to recognize the seriousness of the environmental threats and their health consequences for the citizens (Chan, 1999b). In its 2005 policy address Hong Kong's government announced plans to step up its efforts to raise public awareness of environmental protection and to make Hong Kong a green city and an ideal place to live (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2005).

Public campaigns in the mass media are a marketing communication tool commonly used by governments to reach, inform and persuade a mass audience and to cultivate specific behaviors. Hong Kong's broadcast licensing regulations stipulate that free-to-air television and radio stations must broadcast a certain period of public service announcements every hour free of charge. With the free airtime, public service advertising is able to reach a mass audience and generate significant social impact (Chan, 2010).

The youth market is a major target for environmental protection and sustainable growth messages because of young people's relatively high level of knowledge about global and local environmental issues (Chan, 1999a). The youth segment is also more willing than their elders to accept innovative ideas (Tai and Tam, 1997). They have a

long remaining lifespan in which to practice environmentally friendly behavior and an environment-friendly living style (Lee, 2011). Because of their potential influence on family purchase decisions, they are also an important target for international green marketers (Lee, 2008).

Kotler and his associates long ago described using commercial marketing tools to promote socially desirable behaviors such as wearing seat belts or practicing safer sex (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). Today, social marketing to the youth segment tends to use scare tactics in an attempt to reduce socially undesirable behaviors such as smoking (Hastings and MacFadyen, 2002), drinking and driving (Lewis et al., 2007), and distracted driving (Lennon et al., 2010). There have been very few studies which measured youth's response to public service advertising that advocates pro-social behaviors such as pro-environmental practices. From the public campaign designers' point of view, there is a need to understand audience perceptions of publicity campaigns in order to improve message design and media delivery. This study was designed to measure youths' evaluations of Hong Kong public service advertisements (PSAs) encouraging a green lifestyle.

Literature review

Social marketing has been used for a long time by governments and non-profit organizations in attempts to influence public behavior (Lennon et al., 2010). Public

service campaigns often adopt emotional or fear appeals to discourage socially undesirable behaviors. Dillard and Peck (2000) have proposed that designing effective emotion-based public campaigns should involve first identifying the emotion most amenable to persuasion. For example, fear can be used to alert the audience to their susceptibility to a risk. Sadness can be adopted to encourage the audience to think about the consequences if no preventive measures are taken. After selecting an emotional strategy, the affect should be targeted, and information about what to do with the emotion should be stated explicitly (Dillard and Peck, 2000). Such guidance notwithstanding, the effectiveness of fear appeals in public service advertisements targeting a youth audience has been limited. Studies indicate that young adults recognize the use of fear appeals in PSAs but find them personally irrelevant (Cohn, 1998; Hastings and MacFadyen, 2002). They do not believe that the consequences featured in the PSAs would happen to them (Kempf and Harmon, 2006). Therefore, eliciting perceptions of relevance may be a critical factor in the successful implementation of an emotional strategy when youth are the targets.

Hong Kong, being one of the most densely populated places in the world, suffers from a number of environmental problems, including air pollution, a lack of solid waste disposal options, undesirable noise levels, and water pollution (Chan, 1999b). Scholars have commented that such ecological threats are often a result of

mal-adapted behavior. Some have suggested that environmental problems need to be solved by tighter regulation of individuals and organizations that create pollutants, as well as through education and persuasive campaigns to encourage the general public to adopt environment-friendly behaviors (Maloney and Ward, 1973). In its 1999 policy document the Hong Kong government suggested that making Hong Kong a clean, comfortable and pleasant home would require a fundamental change of mindset (Hong Kong SAR Government, 1999).

In fact, though, the government had already established an Environmental Campaign Committee as early as 1990 to promote public awareness of environmental issues and to mobilize people to contribute towards a better environment (Chan, 1999a). The committee was responsible for designing public service advertisements promoting the government's prevailing environmental policies and initiatives (Environmental Campaign Committee, 2008). For example, the theme for the public service advertisement produced in 1996 was to encourage people to adopt a simple lifestyle, use resources properly, and appreciate nature (Environmental Campaign Committee, 1997). The theme for 2008 was "energy saving" and "stop idling engines" in line with the government's emphasis on building awareness of climate change at that time (Environmental Campaign Committee, 2008). A major publicity campaign was launched in 2007 to encourage people to adopt green living habits. The slogan

was “I love Hong Kong, I love green.” It relied heavily on the free television and radio announcements and spoke about green lifestyles (Environmental Protection Department, 2008).

The radio and television public service ads are referred to in Hong Kong as Announcements in the Public Interest (APIs), a name intending to reflect an emphasis on providing information that the public ought to know (Wong, 2006). Television is considered the most effective medium for delivering APIs because of its reach and its dual audio and visual impact (Wong, 2006). The design and production of APIs is often outsourced to private advertising and media companies, but civil servants in the relevant government departments ultimately select the message designs and the media scheduling. For example, the senior officials of the Road Safety Council are responsible for selecting the messages related to drink driving.

A survey found that 77 percent of the respondents could recall television APIs on drug abuse (Security Bureau, 2007). In another survey 73 percent of respondents reported that television APIs on civic education helped them understand Chinese culture, and 74 percent felt that such APIs were effective in fostering a sense of national identity (Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007). Media, advertising and public relations professionals, however, criticize government APIs as lacking creativity, insulting the intelligence of the public, and lacking cultural sensitivity. APIs promoting

patriotism come in for ample criticism as crude propaganda (Chan, 2005).

Some of the Hong Kong government's APIs specifically target young people. For example, the Narcotics Division of the Security Bureau produces APIs to discourage young people from taking drugs. The Customs and Excise Department produces APIs to warn young people that buying or selling pirated DVDs or VCDs is illegal. The government website typically lists more than 250 current television APIs on up to 20 different topics (Information Services Department, 2011). Government departments consider APIs, and especially television APIs, an effective way to communicate with young people. But the publicity campaigns receive mixed responses from the young people themselves. For example, a survey of adolescents aged 12 to 16 found that the respondents perceived that both their parents and the government encouraged them to eat healthy food more often than their teachers and friends, but the government publicity was perceived as less effective than parental guidance (Chan et al., 2009). The differing perceptions of the government bureaucrats and the young targets of their publicity campaigns indicate a need for campaign designers to improve their communication with young people.

A qualitative study was conducted to examine young people's general attitudes toward Hong Kong's APIs and toward the Green Living public service campaign in particular. The focus was on the televised PSAs because of their reach and because the

designers consider them a core element of the campaign specifically designed for promoting environmental awareness.

The study was designed to provide policy makers and government departments insights into how green advertising messages should be constructed to best reach young people in Hong Kong. About 97% of Hong Kong residents are Chinese, so the study focused entirely on Chinese youth.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative interviews and addressed the following research questions:

Do young people understand the purposes of public service advertisements?

Do they believe public service advertisements?

To what extent do they enjoy watching public service advertisements?

What are their responses to the government's Green Living public service advertisements?

This was an exploratory examination of a phenomenon in which the relevant variables have yet to be identified, so a qualitative methodology was selected (Wimmer and Dominick, 1997). Face-to-face interviews were conducted to solicit individual responses to public service advertisements in general and to the Green Living APIs in particular.

English version of two televised PSAs from the Green Living campaign entitled

“Green Living: City” and “Green Living: Nature” were downloaded from the website of the government’s Information Services Department (Information Services Department, 2011). “Green Living: City” (City) featured several children watering plants and picking fruits, women growing vegetables, a man resting at a rooftop lawn, and a woman appreciating plants grown in the office. Most of the characters wore white clothes. English characters signifying vitality, relaxed, tranquility, go-green, and embrace-nature were superposed. Light music played in the background. The advertisement ended with the voiceover “Green living is around you. Enjoy life, enjoy nature. I love Hong Kong, I love green.” The “Green Living: Nature” (Nature) featured scenes such as sunrise, rocks, a waterfall, waves, birds, butterflies, and a forest. Two children ran around with leaves in their hands and a young female lay on the grass. English characters signifying resilience, high speed, vitality, and creativity were superposed. Music with strong rhythms was in the background. The advertisement ended with the voiceover “Enjoy nature, enjoy life. I love Hong Kong, I love green.” The ads differed in that the Nature images were in fact typical of outlying islands and country parks in Hong Kong, but few viewers would ever have participated in the experiences portrayed in the City ad except for the plants in the office.

The interview protocol consisted of two parts. In the first part the interviewers asked about the interviewees’ general attitudes toward public service advertisements.

The interviewers first explained that public service advertisements are the messages they see on television about issues such as road safety and blood donations. The interviewees were then asked what these messages wanted them to do and whether or not they believed and/or liked such messages. In the second part of the interviews the interviewers showed the two Green Living TV advertisements on a laptop computer. The interviewees were asked about their overall impression of the advertisements and to indicate specific elements in the advertisements that they liked or disliked. The questions asked are listed in Appendix 1.

The interviewees were 34 young Chinese aged 17 to 22 recruited through personal networks. A quota was set to recruit equal numbers of male and female participants. All participants were full-time students. Undergraduate students of the Hong Kong Baptist University served as the interviewers. The study was conducted in Cantonese in September 2009. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in Chinese with selected quotes being translated into English by the authors subsequently. Throughout the analysis, Marshall and Rossman's (1999) comparison analysis method was used to link the data by constantly comparing and contrasting statements (Strauss, 1987). Without imposing any themes, the full transcripts were read through once, and then they were read through again and notes were made of possible emerging themes. The data were then compared to the themes. Once a statement had been coded under a

certain theme, it was removed. The process of reading, coding and refining the themes continued until no further statements remained to be coded and the list of themes had stabilized. Because of the small sample size and the non-random sampling method, the results can only be considered exploratory. They were not, therefore, analyzed by age or sex.

Findings

Altogether, 39 responses were analyzed. As the interviewees were allowed to give more than one answer to each question, the total number of responses exceeded the sample size of 34. Interviewees most often suggested that the purpose of public service advertisements was to ask the audience to imitate specific actions portrayed in the advertisements. This was mentioned in 18 of the 39 responses. The wordings interviewees used were “to do as recommended”, “to do as instructed”, “to do as directed”, or “to follow suit.” Here are two examples to illustrate their points:

“I think that these public service advertisements aim to persuade us to adopt the recommended behaviors in our daily lives. When we are exposed to these advertisements repeatedly, we are expected to internalize the messages and change our behaviors accordingly.” (Female, age 19)

“They tell us citizens’ rights and obligations to the society or promote some moral lessons and civil education, so that we know what we should do to contribute to a better society.” (Male, age 22)

Other frequently reported answers included demonstrating ways to be a good citizen (9 responses), and educating people on selected social issues by providing

relevant information (8 responses). Three responses reported that the public service advertisements encourage people to participate in charitable causes. One response stated that the public service advertisements attempt to establish the reputation of the government department concerned.

The subsequent two questions examined the interviewees' trust in and liking of the televised public service advertisements. Thirteen of the 34 interviewees reported that they believed the public service advertisements they saw on television. They professed to trust in public service advertisements because they perceived the government as a credible source. Among them, one interviewee even perceived that the Broadcasting Authority oversees the production of the public service advertisements to make sure that they are truthful. This perception is actually unfounded. Seven interviewees said they believed public service advertisements because their messages were perceived as reasonable, positive, or were based on common sense. Four interviewees trusted public service advertisements because of their non-commercial intent. They reported that the government did not have any reason to lie to them. Two interviewees said they believed these advertisements because they found the messages positive. Two others admitted that they believed these messages because the messages were in line with their views. Here are a few typical quotes:

“I believe them, as these advertisements are produced by the government. I don’t think that the government will deceive the audience. These messages should have great credibility.” (Female, age 22)

“I believe most of them, as they are based on common sense and reasonable arguments. For example, everyone knows it is dangerous to take drugs or drunk-driving. They are something that we should not do to begin with. So everyone should believe these messages.” (Male, age 22)

“Yes, I believe them. They are always about promoting a better life, and it’s not about promoting a product, so they are more believable to me.” (Female, age 21)

Six interviewees reported that they did not believe the public service advertisements. Four of the six expressed doubts about the truthfulness of the advertisements because they found their messages too propaganda-oriented. Among them, one reported that a well-known public service advertisement about China’s national anthem was a piece of propaganda. One reported that the pervasive “harmonious society” slogan was too high sounding. Two interviewees did not believe public service advertisements because the messages were different from their personal views or their experience. Among them, one reported that she did not believe advertisements promoting healthy eating. She just wanted to eat what she enjoyed.

There were almost equal numbers of responses expressing liking or disliking of public service advertisements. A majority of these judgments were based on the advertisements’ entertainment value. Nine respondents reported that they liked these messages because they found them interesting, funny, or creative. Ten others reported that they disliked them because they found them dull, boring, or uncreative. The

persuasive intention was the second most frequently mentioned reason for liking or disliking such messages. Eight respondents reported that they liked them because these messages have good intentions. Six disliked them because the messages seemed one-sided or too imposing. Three responses cited certain specific production features such as a catchy slogan or a certain cinema graphic as a reason for liking an ad. One disliked them because he or she felt they were repetitive.

The conversation then turned to focus on the “Green Living: City” and “Green Living: Nature” ads. These were shown and the interviewees were asked first for their overall impressions of the two advertisements. All the adjectives and phrases reported by the interviewees could be classified using two dimensions. The first dimension concerned whether the response was positive or negative. The second dimension identified if the response was an emotional reaction or a cognitive evaluation. Table 1 summarizes the results. Altogether eighty-two responses were classified into one of the four quadrants. Interviewees in general expressed positive views of the two advertisements. Fifty-seven of the responses were positive while only twenty-five were negative.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The positive emotions induced by the two ads included enjoyable, refreshing, comfortable, beautiful, and non-preaching. Such compliments focused on sensory

rewards experienced by the interviewees. The visual images and the music together gave the interviewees a sense of peace and relaxation in an enjoyable, green environment. The interviewees felt inspired after exposure to the strikingly beautiful green elements. Two examples are:

“Both advertisements are refreshing and enjoyable, especially the Nature one. It shows us the benefits of greening our environment.” (female, age 21)

“Overall impression is positive. The visuals are so beautiful. I feel very comfortable by watching the ad. It gives me an imaginary green space”. (female, age 22)

Seven responses reported positive evaluations of the ads, including the catchy slogan, good acting, or the inclusion of images of people from all walks of life. Some found the ads relevant to their lives or showing good intentions. Here are two typical quotes:

“I like the city ad. It featured many different characters, such as a kid, a family, and a senior woman. The background music is light and energetic. The slogan ‘I love Hong Kong, I love green’ is easy to remember.” (female, 18)

“I think the message is good. It shows that the government wants us to treasure nature and protect our environment. I think these messages have good purposes.” (female, 20)

On the other hand, twenty-five negative responses included thirteen based on negative emotions evoked and twelve resulting from negative evaluations. The two negative emotional judgments evoked by the advertisements were unrealistic and unimpressive. The scenes featured in the two PSAs were reported to be over-idealistic and out of touch with reality. The interviewees had problems associating these images

with their daily encounters and the environments they were living in. Here is an example:

“The commercials seem fake to me. I have never seen so many trees around tall buildings. Neither have I seen such a beautiful natural environment in Hong Kong. They look fictitious and therefore, they become not convincing.” (female, age 19)

In terms of evaluation, six interviewees considered the images featured irrelevant to the topic of the environment. The two PSAs, some decided, could be mistaken for advertisements for other commercial purposes if not for the slogans at the end. Here is an example:

“The Green Living: Nature advertisement looks so irrelevant to the topic. I would have mistaken it as an advertisement for eco-tourism had I not seen the slogan in the end shot. The scenery doesn’t look like that in Hong Kong at all.” (female, age 21)

Four negative responses reported that the green message lacked a cue-to-action. They found the ads vague or unspecific. They were impressed with the beautiful scenes, but could not help wondering what they were supposed to do to practice green living based on the PSAs. Here is a typical response:

“The scenes are beautiful and refreshing. However, I don’t know what I can do to live a green life. It seems that these messages introduce us to the concept of green life in Hong Kong without telling us the specifics. It becomes useless as I cannot put them into practice.” (female, age 22)

The interviewees were asked to recall specific elements in the advertisements that they liked or disliked, and to explain their reactions. Table 2 summarizes the findings. The specific liked elements mentioned with respect to the City ad included the people, the music, and the featured theme. Some interviewees contended that

featuring various kinds of people in this PSA increases the sense of relevance for the viewer. More interestingly, eight responses mentioned the presence of children. The interviewees found such presence cute and adorable, and most importantly kids represent the future and thus matched well with the prospect of green living. The interviewees also expressed a liking for the uplifting and refreshing music and thought it accented the visuals. Two interviewees found the featured theme particularly favorable. They liked the positive message intended and found it clearer and closer to life than the message in the Nature ad.

Those interviewees who favored Nature focused on the visual impact of the green and natural scenes it featured. They found the pervasive shots of green refreshing and pretty. However, they said they were drawn to this element because of its scarcity in reality. As one of the interviewees commented, “...If I have to pick some element that I like, I would pick the green scenery as it is not that visible in reality at all. So it is kind of comforting to see it in the ad.” (female, age 19)

The natural scenes were the most liked element in Nature. Interestingly, such an element was also criticized as unrealistic and creating a sense of detachment among its viewers, as it presented something that Hong Kong people desired but found it hard to experience or access.

General expressions of liked elements not specifying the PSA they were associated with mentioned all the elements discussed so far including cute kids,

background music, a meaningful message, and pretty scenes. Two interviewees expressed a liking for the slogan. They considered it memorable, meaningful and relevant to the topic.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Altogether 31 elements most disliked were reported. Many interviewees disliked the two PSAs due to what they felt were unrealistic visual depictions (mentioned 18 times) or uninformative messages (13 times). The visual depictions in City were criticized as fake and pretentious. The activities featured in this ad such as harvesting vegetables and fruits in an orchard or drinking coffee on a rooftop lawn were considered out of touch with real life in Hong Kong.

The visual depictions in Nature received similar negative feedback for featuring extreme outdoor activities such as water-skiing or rock climbing. They are not activities ordinary Hong Kong people would have ever participated in. The wild natural scenes were deemed idealistic and unreachable. A typical comment was: “Although the nature scenes look strikingly beautiful, I am not even aware that such places exist in Hong Kong. They look so unfamiliar and distant.” (female, age 22)

The messages presented in the two PSAs (Nature particularly) drew some criticisms as being vague, confusing, and uninformative. Interviewees remarked that the PSAs sell them a lifestyle without concrete instructions on how to realize green living in daily life. As a result, some interviewees questioned the relevance of the

message. Here is an example.

“They don’t have a clear message. Don’t think they are relevant to the topic. They just present a general impression of green with abstract and fragmented concepts. Don’t know whether they are trying to be thought-provoking or misleading.” (male, age 22)

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Chinese youth in Hong Kong have relatively accurate perceptions of the purposes of PSAs. The youthful respondents correctly perceived that the government is providing the public with specific instructions, guidelines, or directions in the PSAs and hopes the audience will follow the recommended actions. The government is perceived as a socializing agent that promotes certain behavioral norms. Judging from the words used by the interviewees such as “instructed”, “directed”, and “recommended”, the government is also perceived as at a great power distance from its audience. The perceived directive role of the government in the public service campaigns is very different from that usually found in western societies. Public service advertisements in the United States often attempt to link the desired behavior to something of value to the viewer and thus encourage individuals to adopt the behavior (Lennon et al., 2010).

Most of the interviewees said they tend to find government-produced PSAs credible, as they consider the Hong Kong government trustworthy as a sponsor of such messages. These findings point to the persuasive potential of

government-produced PSAs—its young target viewers are aware of the intent of such messages yet still trust their sponsor to provide pro-social guidelines. Many, however, express doubt about PSAs that are too propaganda-oriented, too politically self-serving or too high sounding.

In addition, they expressed liking or disliking of PSAs on the basis of their entertainment values. They favor messages that are creatively executed with interesting or funny twists. They appreciate the good intentions of PSAs but dislike those with one-sided or over-imposing messages. These findings are consistent with a qualitative study of liking and disliking of television commercials which found that interviewees were impressed by stimulating, creative, and light-hearted messages and turned off by preachy, dogmatic, and authoritative narratives (Chan, 2010). Such findings provide an insightful direction for the government offices attempting to produce engaging messages targeting youth.

In line with these findings, the two Green Living PSAs seem to possess some of the required engaging features. Featuring attractive visuals, refreshing music, diverse characters and catchy slogans, the two PSAs use a soft-sell approach to highlight ideal lifestyles associated with green living. They contain minimal verbal narrative and directives and the respondents seem to feel that they present a non-threatening and non-imposing picture of the benefits of green living. Most of the young interviewees

claimed to appreciate this form of presentation, and the two ads were able to generate a high frequency of positive emotions and evaluations. The two ads employ emotional appeals, and a significantly higher proportion of positive rather than negative emotions was evoked, providing tentative evidence of the success of the publicity campaign. However, the government, like their young audience, is seeking more than mere emotional responses from the advertisements, and the respondents pointed out several thought-provoking deficiencies in the design and delivery of the message. Their criticisms can be categorized into two general themes: “How is this Hong Kong?” and “What am I supposed to do?” Many of the criticisms of these two PSAs centered on their realism and relevance. The visuals featured in the two PSAs were considered by many too good to be true. The interviewees in this study have neither experienced such out-of-touch activities nor been exposed to the splendid wild nature scenes in their daily lives. The question “Is this Hong Kong?” or “How could these be real?” easily came to mind. Many perceived what was being depicted as outrageously pretentious. They felt the perfect green lifestyles depicted are beyond imagining in the current conditions of Hong Kong life. They looked so idealistic and fictitious that some viewers doubted their relevance to the topic. The advertisements were sometimes be mistaken for ads for real estate projects or eco-tourism.

According to cognitive dissonance theory, psychological discomfort may result

when people are confronted with a discrepancy between what they know and new information (Cooper, 2007; Festinger, 1957). Such psychological discomfort is likely to induce actions to accommodate the new information in order to minimize the discrepancy between the desired and current states. It is therefore understandable why those perfect green living depictions were featured in the two PSAs. Nevertheless, problems arise when this discrepancy is perceived as far too large to minimize. Instead of accommodating the new information, people have to discredit it in order to maintain their psychological comfort. The green living scenes and activities may fail to motivate people to summon up a longing for such a lifestyle and instead turn them away because of the apparently unresolvable cognitive dissonance induced by the visual depictions.

“What am I supposed to do?” was the other major category of negative feedback. It relates to the specificity and applicability of the messages. Although the scenes were nicely filmed and beautifully edited, they provide no concrete instructions for the audience on how to adopt such a lifestyle. Viewers are left in confusion with no clues as to how to bring green living to their daily lives. So, these strikingly beautiful scenes indicate impossible dreams for many of the youth viewers.

Generalizing from these two examples, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of how public service advertisements change audience behavioral intentions and achieve

desirable outcomes, at least in Hong Kong.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

To encourage an individual's intentions to practice a desired behavior, the individual should perceive himself capable of performing specific actions to achieve a desired end state. So public service advertisements should be designed to achieve two purposes. They should first evoke desirable emotions. In this specific context the desirable emotion is the enjoyable feeling evoked through the visual images of beautiful scenery, the energetic music, and the attractive characters portrayed.

However, evoking the right emotion alone is not sufficient enough to empower the audience with the ability to perform a specific action. The message also needs to arouse a sense of personal relevance, which constitutes the ad's second purpose. The audience needs to relate to the message on a personal level. The message has to induce a sense of involvement so the audience is motivated to be actors instead of observers. Second, the message needs to inform the audience about what they should or can do to achieve the desirable end state. When a desire for the end state has been induced, the viewer finds the end state personally relevant, and the viewer understands how the end state might be achieved, only then is he likely to feel confident in carrying out the recommended actions. In the examples studied, the two PSAs were successful in triggering desirable emotions associated with green living

but they failed to make the message relevant to the audience and the recommendations concrete. As a result, the interviewees did not perceive themselves competent to do much about it and had only weak behavioral intentions to adopt a green lifestyle.

Conclusions

The findings of this study point to the importance of careful message design. The two green living PSAs studied were found successful in evoking positive emotions, but failed to convert the emotions into behavioral intention. Over-idealistic images of benefits or outcomes are likely to be perceived as a cognitive barrier that is too difficult to overcome. Instead of adopting such images as reference points for behavioral change, viewers are likely to discredit the images as fictitious and lacking relevance. The situation is even worse when no concrete instructions on how to accomplish the outcomes are available. Idealistic images and scenarios that deviate too much from the target audience's experiences and create too much a discrepancy with reality are more likely to turn people off than to motivate them to comply. Public campaign organizers should be careful in striking a balance between creating a challenging desired end state and an ideal to which people cannot relate.

This evaluative study, though exploratory in nature, documents how Chinese youth perceives government PSAs in general and the two PSAs promoting green

living in particular. The external validity of the findings may, however, be limited by the use of such a small convenience sample. The study also suffers from using multiple interviewers with individual differences in interviewing skills. But despite of the limitations, the findings sketch useful suggestions for designing message targeting Chinese youth. Although it is important for PSAs to evoke desirable emotions, emotion alone cannot drive behavioral intention. PSAs should induce a sense of personal relevance at the same time in order to elicit a perception of personal competence from the youth audience. Future public campaigns need to take these factors into consideration in order to come up with persuasive message designs.

So social marketers targeting Chinese youth need first to design messages tailored to the audience such that the discrepancy between the desired and current states is acceptable. Apparently, more is not necessarily better. A discrepancy that is perceived as too large to bridge is likely to frustrate youth viewers (or, indeed, any viewers) and induce a sense of detachment rather than engagement. When the goal seems unattainable in comparison with reality, viewers will discredit the goal as irrelevant and unrealistic. To strike a balance between challenging and realistic goals, public campaign organizers need to conduct careful formative research in order to gauge the degree of discrepancy acceptable for the target audience.

Second, public campaign designers should tell the audience what specific

behaviors they can adopt to contribute to, for example, Green Living. They should provide practical recommendations, perhaps using other channels that can accommodate more detail and concrete information. It is important for public campaign designers to have such information ready and accessible, and prompt the audience with encouragement to seek more information after seeing the emotional PSAs. Failure to provide accesses to such information is likely to frustrate the target audience and evoke the impression of empty promises beyond realization.

And then, PSAs aimed at youth should seek ways to engage their young audience. Bundling the PSAs with games is one obvious example. In the case of the Nature ad studied, the visuals of Hong Kong scenery could be posted on a website and the audience asked to guess the exact locations of the scenes. The answers could also provide ways of getting there. Viewers might be invited to download the visuals of the PSA as screen savers, or the slogan as a ring tone. The young audience could be invited to construct their own versions of PSAs with their choice of music. A website address might be added to encourage youth to share their experiences or their difficulties in practicing green living.

A minor finding of this study also carries significant implications for public campaign organizers. A feature in the two PSAs which drew positive feedback from the interviewees was the people— unknown actors portraying ordinary people

enjoying green living in the city or in the countryside. Some interviewees said they appreciated seeing different social and age groups portrayed. Their presence in the various green environments may induce a sense of identification among the viewers. The audience felt they could identify with those “typical” citizens, who thus served as a connection of relevance between the messages and the viewers. Public campaign organizers are advised to carefully select presenters that the target audience is likely to identify with so as to increase the perceived relevance of the messages.

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Table 1 Overall impression of the two Green Living advertisements

	Positive	Freq.*	Negative	Freq.*
Emotion	enjoyable/happy	21	unrealistic	10
	refreshing, relaxing	13	unimpressive	3
	comfortable	6		
	impressive visually	5		
	non-preaching	5		
	Sub-total	(50)		(13)
Evaluation	memorable	3	irrelevant	6
	good intention	2	lack of cue-to-action	4
	relevant	2	idealistic	2
	Sub-total	(7)		(12)

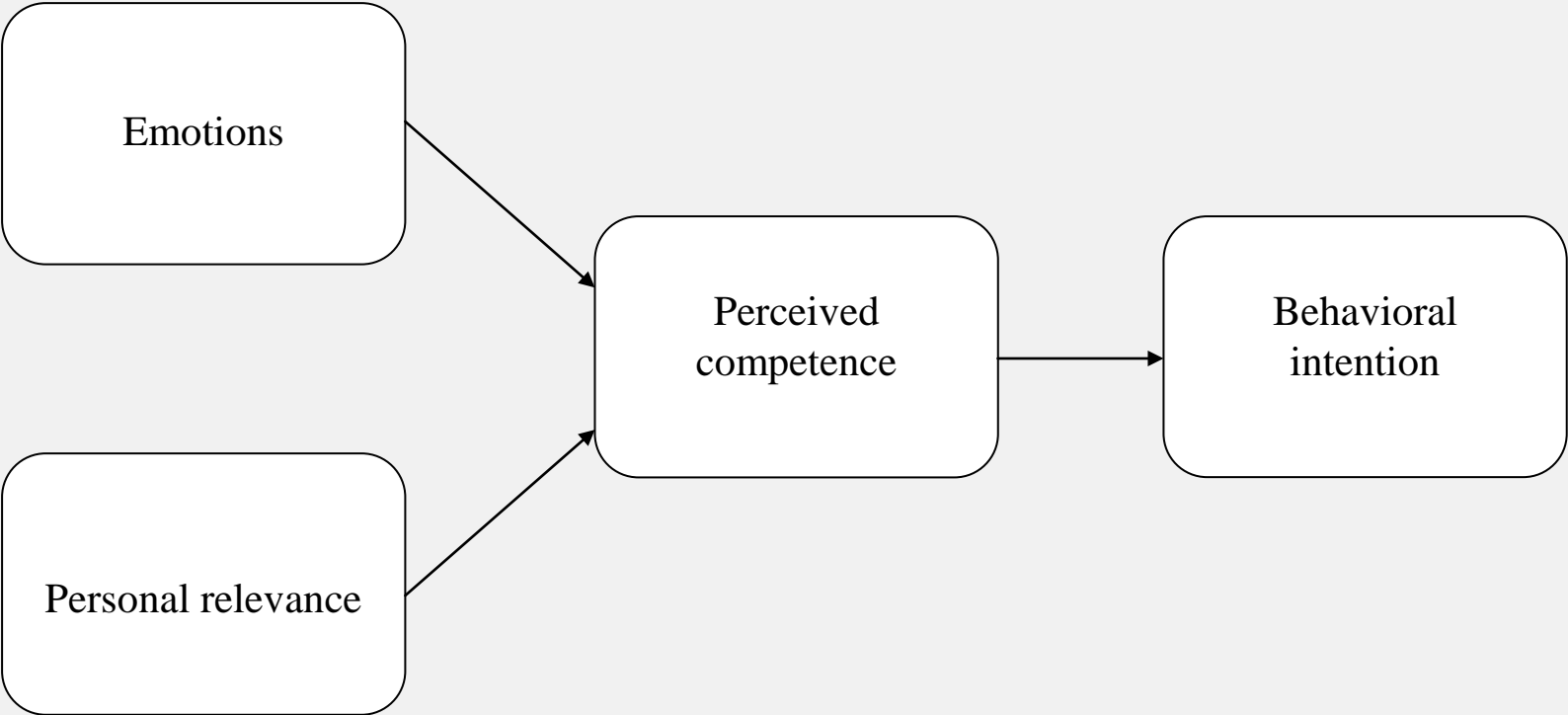
*Interviewees could give more than one answer

Table 2 Elements of the two Green Living advertisements liked or disliked

Specific elements of the advertisements liked/disliked the most	Frequency*
Liked	
People (kids particularly)	11
Green scenery	11
Featured themes	9
Background music	8
Slogan	2
Disliked	
Unrealistic visual depictions	18
Uninformative messages	13

*Interviewees could give more than one answer

Figure 1 A proposed conceptual model



Appendix 1 Interview Script*

Most of the commercials we come across on television are promoting products and services. However, there are some messages that are related with our daily lives such as road safety, anti-theft and blood donation etc. We call these message public services advertisements. We are going to discuss such messages.

1. What do these messages want us to do?
2. Do you believe what is being said in these messages? Why?
3. Do you like these messages or dislike them? Why do you like them or dislike them?
4. Now let me show you two public service announcements. [Show “Green living: City” and “Green living: Nature”]. What is your overall impression of these two PSAs?
5. Which specific elements/parts of the PSAs do you like the most and why?
6. Which specific elements/parts of the PSAs do you dislike the most and why?

* A translation. The actual script was in Chinese.