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Information Content of Television Advertising in China: An Update

Kara Chan & Fanny Chan

The current study was an update of Chan's (1995) study of television advertising conducted in 1993 in China. A content analysis of 386 Chinese television commercials in 2002 was conducted. The Resnik and Stern evaluation criteria were adopted to determine the level of advertising information content in television commercials. Compared to the previous study in 1993, Chinese commercials were becoming less informative. The percentage of informative ads dropped from 58% in 1993 to 55% in 2002. The average information cue dropped from 1.5 cues in 1993 to 1.3 cues in 2002 in each commercial classified as informative. The three most frequently used information cues were the same as in the last study, namely, performance, components/contents, and quality. Non-durables and pharmaceutical advertising remained as the most informative while liquor advertising was again the least informative. Information content was found dependent on characteristics of the broadcast channels but not duration.

Keywords: Television Advertising; China; Content Analysis; Informative

Background

Since the open policy adopted in 1979, China has introduced many aspects of capitalist economics into its socialist economy. With the entry into the WTO, it is expected that China's economic growth will be even quicker. China's gross national product (GNP) reached 94,346 billion in year 2001 (China Infobank, 2003a). The enormous population of 1.3 billion people and its rapid pace of economic development have made China an attractive consumer market for global marketers. It is expected that Chinese people, now with more money to spend, will begin to desire a wider choice of products and services. Advertising serves as a tool to assist consumers to make purchase decisions and enterprises to promote products and services.

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In the past decade, advertising has become one of the fastest growing industries in China. Table 1 shows the indicators for advertising development since 1993 when Chan's (1995) study was conducted. According to the official statistics, advertising expenditure in 2001 was 79.5 billion yuan (around US\$10.2 billion) (*China Advertising Yearbook*, 2002). The average annual growth rate for advertising revenue for the period 1993 to 2001 was 25%. That means advertising revenue nearly doubled every three years during that period. The number of companies and number of persons engaged in the advertising industry were growing at a much lower rate of about 12% per year. The growth rate of the advertising industry in China has been very impressive. However, the development of advertising is highly uneven within the nation. In the year 2000, Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong provinces were the country's three advertising centers, accounting for nearly half of the national advertising expenditures (Fan, 2001).

The four major advertising media in China were television, newspaper, broadcast radio and magazine. It was appropriate to study television advertising due to its national coverage and its huge audience size. The household penetration rate for television in 2002 was 99.5% (China Infobank, 2003b). This indicates that nearly every Chinese family has at least one TV set. Television has become the major advertising medium in China. It contributed 49% of the total media expenditure and was the most important media in 2001 (*China Advertising Yearbook*, 2002). Television audience reached 1.1 billion in 2003 (CCTV website, 2003). On average, urban households can access 15 channels while rural households can access six channels. The average amount of time Chinese people spent on television was 2.2 hours per day (*Journalism Publishing News*, 1998). Due to its wide coverage and strong audio and visual demonstration power, television stood out as an excellent medium for marketing consumer products.

During 1993 to 2001, the advertising industry in China has undergone some major restructuring. One of the milestones was the establishment of the first national law to regulate advertising. China announced its Advertising Law on October 27, 1994 at the

Table 1 China's Advertising Development, 1993-2001

	1993	2001	Average annual increase (%)
Advertising expenditure (billion yuan)	13.4	79.5	25
GDP (billion yuan)	3,463	9,593	14
Population (million)	1,185	1,276	0.9
Per capita advertising expenditure (yuan)	11.3	62.3	24
Number of companies engaged in advertising	31,770	78,339	12
Number of persons engaged in advertising industry	311,967	709,076	11
Number of advertising education programs in universities	35	75	10

Source: *China Advertising Yearbook* (2002); *China Statistical Yearbook* (2002).

10th session of the Standing Committee of the Eighth National People's Congress, and it went into effect on February 1, 1995 (Asia Law and Practice Limited, 1994). For a review of the evolution and changes in advertising regulations in China, see the works done by Hong Cheng and others (Cheng, 1996, 1997; Zhang, 2001). Advertising regulation remains a big challenge to the advertising industry today. An opinion survey on advertising personnel reviewed that corruption in the censorship system and ineffective advertising regulations were perceived as major problems hindering the development of the advertising industry in China (Chinadde Net, 2003).

Despite the booming of the advertising industry, public attitude toward advertising was becoming more and more negative. In a survey of 500 respondents in Beijing in 1996, consumers' overall attitude toward advertising in general was positive with about two-thirds of the sample considering advertising a good thing (Chan, 1998). A recent survey of 583 young consumers aged 18 to 24 in 1999 reflected mixed attitudes towards advertising. Young consumers perceived that advertising is essential to the prosperity of the economy and agreed that advertising helps raise the standard of living. However, they were dissatisfied with the deception in advertising (Liu, 2002). Chan and McNeal (2003) surveyed 1,665 parents with children aged six to 14 and found that they held negative attitudes toward television advertising in general and children's advertising in specific. They were skeptical about the truthfulness of television commercials.

The negative attitudes toward advertising are closely related with the vast amount of deceptive advertisements. Illegal ads are mostly about fake medicine, medical services, and food (Xinhua News Agency, 1998). The State Administration for Industry and Commerce (SAIC), a government watchdog for the advertising industry in China, uncovered 66,824 cases of illegal advertisements in 2000 (*China Advertising Yearbook*, 2001).

With the implementation of the Advertising Law and the changing public attitudes, it will be important to revisit the advertising content and map out the changes. Since Chan's (1995) study was conducted before the enforcement of the Advertising Law, it did not have the chance to examine the perceived impact of the Advertising Law on advertising content in China. Therefore the objective of this article is to update Chan's (1995) study in China. The study aims to find out whether there are any changes in the advertising information contents after the implementation of the Advertising Law and try to explain why there are such changes.

Literature Review

Informative and emotional advertising are two basic types of creative strategies. Informative advertisements communicate facts about the product or the brand. The targeted response is usually a logical thinking process. Emotional advertisements on the other hand attempt to establish a favorable feeling and associate it with the brand. Viewers' perception indicated great differences in their perceptions of commercials

using these two different creative strategies. Informative commercials were most frequently considered to be dull, uninteresting and informative. Emotional commercials were most frequently perceived as appealing, interesting and original. Commercials with no objective information cues can sometimes be perceived as 'informative' by the viewers. For example, over 30% of 160 respondents considered an emotional television commercial featuring a group of people watching a folk performance in a theme park on Chinese local cultures 'informative' (Chan, 1996).

Resnik and Stern (1977) conducted a pioneer study to establish an objective measurement for the information content in advertising. An advertisement was operationally defined as informative if it contained one or more of 14 possible information cues (see Table 2). These cues, such as price and availability, represent categories of potentially useful information to consumers. About half of the sample of network television advertising was classified as informative in 1975 as well as in 1986 (Resnik & Stern, 1991). When extended to cable TV, the 1986 sample indicated that 65% was classified as informative. Previous results indicated that amount of information content in television advertising depended on characteristics of the media as well as the product categories. Commercials broadcast in the evening were more informative than those in the morning or afternoon. Products in the introductory stage were more informative than products in the growing and mature stages (Resnik & Stern, 1991). Crask and Laskey (1990) found that nearly all the commercials in a sample of personal, household, and food items were informative.

Information was used to set the brand at an advantage when compared to competitors rather than to give the product a distinct personality.

The Resnik and Stern classification was applied to the study of magazine, newspaper and radio advertising. Abernethy (1992) analyzed a sample of 14,554 magazine ads and 1,655 television commercials pooled from 11 independent studies

Table 2 Resnik and Stern's List of Information Cues

1	Price: cost of the product, value retention capability
2	Quality: objective evaluation of workmanship, engineering, durability, excellence of materials, structure superiority, superiority of personnel, attention to details, or special services
3	Performance: function of the product, how well does it do
4	Components/contents: ingredients, composition, ancillary items
5	Availability: place of purchase, available period, contact phone number
6	Special offer: limited time non-price details
7	Taste: superiority of taste in test by a sample of potential customers
8	Nutrition: specific data of nutritional content
9	Packaging: package more desirable than alternatives
10	Guarantees/warranties: post purchase assurance
11	Safety: safety features
12	Independent research: research done by independent research firm
13	Company research: research done by advertiser
14	New ideas: new product concepts

Source: Resnik and Stern (1977).

published between 1977 and 1990 and found that magazine advertisements contained far more informational elements than those television commercials. Abernethy and Butler (1992) found that newspaper advertisements were more informative than magazine advertisements.

Similar studies were conducted in different parts of the world including the United States (Chou, Franke & Wilcox; 1987; Harmon, Razzouk & Stern, 1983; Lacznik, 1979; Stern, Krugman & Resnik, 1981), Australia (Dowling, 1980), Canada (Pollay,

Zaichkowsky & Fryer, 1980), China (Chan, 1995; Rice & Lu, 1988), Hong Kong (Chan, 1986, 1994), India (Khan, Azam & Khan, 1991), Japan (Hong, Muderrisoglu

& Zinkham, 1987; Madden, Caballero & Masukubo, 1986), South Korea (Keown, Jacobs, Schmidt & Ghy mn, 1992) and the United Kingdom (Taylor, 1983). Based on their focuses, these studies can be roughly categorized into three groups. The first group of studies attempts to compare advertisements from eastern and western cultures, e.g. comparing American and Chinese children's commercials (Ji & McNeal, 2001). The theoretical base is that culture plays an important part in the creation and processing of advertising messages. Cultural dimension such as the tolerance of uncertainty would influence the use of information cues. Zandpour et al. (1994) conducted a content analysis of 1,914 TV commercials in 23 countries to examine a set of factors pertaining to culture and advertising industry environment that would shape the nature of television commercials around the world. Zandpour et al. (1994) predicted that commercials in individualistic cultures would contain more information to assist consumers' decision-making. Cultures with a higher degree of uncertainty avoidance would contain more information. Television commercials in markets with strict government control would contain less information in order to avoid the detailed substantiation requirements of such governments. Results generally supported the hypotheses.

The second group of studies focused on advertisements from similar cultures, e.g. comparing advertisements from Canada and US (Pollay et al., 1980), China and Hong Kong (Chan, 1995). The third group of studies focused on changes in information contents of the same culture over time (e.g. Stern & Resnik, 1991).

Hypotheses about Changes

The development of advertising in the US can be divided into four stages: product information, product image, personalization, and lifestyle that encompassed seven decades from the 1910s to the 1980s (Leiss, Kline & Jhally, 1990). China experienced its first advertising boom in the 1920s and 1930s, but its development came to a halt when the Chinese Communist Party began to institute a centrally planned economy after 1949. Advertising resumed in the late 1970s when China embarked on its market-oriented economic reform movement. The growth of the advertising industry in China was very rapid in the last two decades. If the development of advertising in China follows that of the US, it will move away from the product information stage (Leiss et al., 1990). China launched its first national Advertising Law in 1995 and the

government control over advertising became stricter. As a previous study indicates, advertising in a strict government control led market environment will be less informative. So, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Chinese television commercials will be less informative than that in 1993.

Previous studies indicated that product categories had an influence on the information content of advertising. Commercials for food, beverages and services were less informative while commercials for personal care and household durables were more informative across all markets and cultures (Zandpour et al., 1994). As Chinese advertising is developing, we hypothesize that it will be moving toward the global norm. So, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Chinese food, beverages and services commercials will be less informative.

H3: Chinese personal care and household durables commercials will be more informative.

Previous studies indicated that in a mature advertising market environment, there was a marked difference between types of commercials carried by national and regional media. For example, the national TV networks carried mainly commercials of national brands. Their durations were short and the communication strategy was to maintain audience awareness of the brands. On the other hand, stations not aligned with the networks contained more commercials of local advertisers. These local advertisements contained more information. This was because they needed to go beyond brand awareness and draw consumers to a particular site (Cobb-Walgren, 1990). Such disparity between national and local advertising was reported in a recent content analysis study (Zhang & Harwood, 2004). Modernity value occurred more frequently in national commercials while utilitarian value (quality/effectiveness) occurred more frequently in regional and local television commercials. So, it is hypothesized that:

H4: Commercials occurring in the national Chinese TV channels will be less informative than commercials occurring in the regional Chinese TV channels.

Methodology

A sample of 386 different commercials were videotaped from prime time (7:30 - 10:30pm) from three television channels in China, including CCTV-1 and two regional channels, Nanjing TV-1 and Chengdu TV-1, during the period May 15 -21, 2002. Nanjing is a city in Jiangsu province that is near Shanghai. Chengdu is a city situated in western China and is the capital city of the Xichuan province. Nanjing and Chengdu were selected to represent medium and low levels of development of the advertising industry, respectively, according to the provincial advertising expenditures in 2000 (Fan, 2001). All commercials occurred in the sampled week and sampled time was included. Any duplicated commercial occurring was not included in order to eliminate the bias from broadcast frequency of commercials. Public

services announcements, station identification and promotional messages were also excluded.

All commercials were videotaped and later replayed in order to carefully review each commercial's content. Two Chinese graduates with competence in Putonghua and Cantonese were recruited as coders. They were trained and tested on a pilot exercise of 20 commercials. They viewed the taped commercials independently to determine whether each of the 14 information cues was presented or not. The sample was then re-examined by the author for checking and finalizing for any disagreement occurred. The inter-coder reliability level ranged from 0.98 to 1.0 for the 14 information cues. This far exceeded the minimum reliability level of 85% specified by Kassirjian (1977).

According to Resnik and Stern's (1977) criterion of informative commercials, a commercial was classified as informative if it contained at least one of the 14 information cues (see Table 2).

The sample in 1993 was taped from CCTV-1 and three regional channels in Guangdong province. The sample profile reported some changes. The 2002 sample contained a higher percentage of non-durables (namely, personal and household cleansing products) and durables commercials, and a lower percentage of pharmaceutical commercials when compared with the 1993 sample. The percentage of short commercials (B20 second) was 81% in the 2002 sample and was 41% in the 1993 sample.

Results

As indicated in Table 3, more than half (55%) of the sampled commercials contained at least one information cue and hence were classified as informative. Fifteen percent contained at least two information cues. Only 3% of the sample commercials contained at least three information cues. Altogether 282 information cues were recorded in the 213 commercials that were classified as informative. In each informative commercial, there was an average of 1.3 cues. One vitamin tonic

Table 3 Information Content of Television Commercials

No of information cues per commercial	1993		2002	
	No. of commercials	% of sample	No. of commercials	% of sample
No cue	135	41.7	173	44.8
At least one cue	189	58.3	213	55.2
At least two cues	77	23.8	58	15.0
At least three cues	20	6.2	10	2.6
At least four cues	2	0.7	1	0.3
Five cues	1	0.3	0	0.0
Total	324	100.0	386	100.0

commercial was found to feature four information cues. It featured performance, contents, availability and special offer. It said the tonic could allow user to regain strength and keep energetic all the time. It mentioned the content of the tonic and it was available in major supermarkets. It also mentioned a promotional premium of a book of tips for preparing examinations. In 1993, there were 189 commercials classified as informative, and each informative commercial contained an average of 1.5 information cues. Compared to Chan's (1995) study, the percentage of informative ads did not have a significant change (chi-square=0.7, ns). However, the average number of informative cues per commercial classified as informative indicates a significant drop ($t=3.1$, $p < 0.01$). As a result, H1 is partially supported.

Table 4 reports the frequency of appearance of the 14 information cues. The results indicated that performance was the most commonly featured information cue, appearing in 36% of the commercials. The emphasis on performance is not surprising, as this is the item of most concern according to various consumer studies. The information cue 'components/contents' was the next most commonly featured cue (12%) followed by quality (8%) and availability (7%). Commercials featuring information cues on price, taste, packaging, independent research, and safety were rare. Totally 4% of the sampled commercials contained these cues. Information cues on guarantees/warranties, nutrition and company research were completely absent in the sample. Two of the 14 informational cues showed a significant drop in occurrence, namely, quality and guarantee/warranties (chi-square=21.6, $p < 0.0001$; chi-square=6.0, $p < 0.05$, respectively). The number of commercials featured 'quality' in the 2002 sample dropped by half as compared to the 1993 sample. No commercial feature 'guarantee' was found in the 2002 sample whereas there were five cases in the 1993 sample.

Further analysis indicated that the quality informational cue recorded a significant drop in two product categories, namely, durables and non-durables. Forty-eight percent of durable commercials in 1993 contained quality information while 13% of durable commercials in 2002 contained such information. Twenty-six of non-durable commercials (namely, personal and household cleansing products) in 1993 contained quality information while 8% of those in 2002 contained such information. The guarantee informational cue recorded a significant drop in pharmaceutical commercials and food and beverages commercials. There were four pharmaceutical commercials and one food and beverages commercial featured guarantee information in the 1993 sample and there was none in the 2002 sample.

Analysis was conducted to determine if level of information differed among the type of product categories being advertised (see Table 5). Significant difference was found between percentage of informative commercials and different product categories (chi-square value=47.6, $p < 0.0001$). Pharmaceutical and non-durables commercials contained the highest percentage of informative commercials. It was followed by durables and servicing/retailing commercials. Cigarette and liquor commercials were the least informative. However, the percentage of informative commercials by different product categories did not change significantly over the

Table 4 Type of Information in Television Commercials, 1993 and 2002

Information cue	1993		2002		<i>t</i> -statistics
	No. of commercials containing the cue	% of sample	No. of commercials containing the cue	% of sample	
Performance	127	39.2	137	35.5	NS
Components/contents	44	13.6	48	12.4	NS
Quality	66	20.4	32	8.3	21.6***
Availability	31	9.6	25	6.5	NS
New ideas	4	1.2	12	3.1	NS
Special offer	4	1.2	12	3.1	NS
Price	3	0.9	5	1.3	NS
Taste	1	0.3	4	1.0	NS
Packaging	0	0.0	3	0.8	NS
Independent research	1	0.3	2	0.5	NS
Safety	1	0.3	2	0.5	NS
Guarantees/warranties	5	1.5	0	0.0	6.0*
Nutrition	2	0.6	0	0.0	NS
Company research	0	0.0	0	0.0	NS

Note: Each commercial can have more than one information cue.
NS=not significant at 0.05 level, **p* B0.05; ****p* B0.0001.

nine years. As a result, H2 and H3 were not supported. In other words, food and beverages and service commercials did not become less informative and personal care and household durables commercials did not become more informative in the past nine years.

Analysis was also conducted to explore the relationship between level of information and characteristics of television commercial. Results in Table 6 demonstrated that there was significant difference in the percentage of informative commercials between commercials recorded from different TV channels in the 2002 sample (chi-square=6.5, *p* B0.05). Regional channels were found to contain more informative commercials than the national channel in both the 1993 and 2002

Table 5 Percentage of Informative Commercials by Product Category and Year

Product category	1993		2000	
	No. of commercials	% of informative commercials	No. of commercials	% of informative commercials
Drugs	83	75	65	78
Non-durables	57	75	96	69
Durables	63	59	93	51
Servicing/retailing	36	39	40	45
Food and beverages	60	48	67	42
Cigarette and liquor	25	16	25	12

Note: Chi-square value equals 41.7 and significance level B0.001 in 1993, chi-square value equals 47.6 and significance level B0.0001 in 2002.

samples. As a result, H4 was supported. There was no significant difference in the percentage of informative commercials among commercials with different duration. Also, commercials recorded from different channels and with different duration do not differ significantly in the percentage of informative commercials over the period.

Discussion and Conclusion

This current study provides an update about advertising information contents in Chinese television advertising. Chan's (1995) study indicated that the percentage of informative commercials dropped significantly from 92% in 1988 (Keown et al., 1992) to 58% in 1993. The current study did not report a similar drastic drop of information content in the past nine years. The percentage of informative commercials dropped from 58% in 1993 to 55% in 2002. The amount of information content carried by individual commercials dropped significantly. It was mainly due to the drop of two information cues, i.e. quality and guarantees. The drop in the use of quality information cue among durables and non-durables commercials indicates that Chinese advertising continued to move away from product information stage. Consumer behavior in China had undergone rapid modification as economic and social reforms continued. As Chinese people are more affluent and experienced in consumption, the advertising content changed from a product-centered theme (emphasizing on product characteristics) to an audience-centered theme (emphasizing on lifestyle and ideal self-image). Factual information no longer was used as support for quality. We expect that the brand's equity now replaces factual information to demonstrate quality. Many shampoos and skincare commercials used celebrity endorsement and presented consumers with user profile images. The continued shift of direct informative advertising to emotional or symbolic appeal advertising further illustrated that China was now entering a post-scarcity age. Today, people consume not only to buy daily necessity but also as a way to build up their

Table 6 Percentage of Informative Commercials by Characteristics of TV Commercial

Characteristics of commercial	1993		2002	
	No. of commercials	% of informative commercials	No. of commercials	% of informative commercials
<i>Channel</i>				
National	138	52	227	50
Regional ^a	186	63	159	63
	Chi-square=3.9, NS		Chi-square=6.5*	
<i>Duration</i>				
B20 seconds	134	52	314	54
20+ seconds	190	63	72	60
	Chi-square=3.5, NS		Chi-square=0.7, NS	

NS is not significant 0.05 level, * $p < 0.05$.

^aFrom Guangdong province in 1993; from Jiangsu and Xichuan provinces in 2003.

social status. China now keeps moving from a Wen Bao (enough to eat) society to a Xiao Kang (well-to-do) society. Chinese consumers began to look for other satisfaction from product and services, like happiness, enjoyment, excitement and self-esteem. The economic reform and the entry of the WTO make Chinese citizens much more well off now as compared to nine years ago. They acquired high purchasing power and more consumption experiences. They are less involved in purchase decisions and less likely to search for product information.

The drop in the guarantees information cue demonstrates the advertising industry's response to tightened advertising regulation. Article 9 of the Advertising Law requires that statements in advertisements of the performance, origin of production, use, quality, price, producer and manufacturer, valid term and promise of the goods or services advertised shall be clear and explicit. Article 14 of the Advertising Law mandated that advertisements of pharmaceuticals and medical apparatus may not contain contents about assertions or warranties that express unscientific function or the mention of the rate of successful healing. For the five commercials with guarantee information cues in 1993, four pharmaceutical commercials guaranteed a refund if consumers found the products not effective. One beverage commercial claimed that a Chinese insurance company guaranteed its quality. Under the new Advertising Law, guarantee of refund is problematic for pharmaceutical commercials as it may imply a certain rate of successful healing. A guarantee of quality needs to be substantiated. Therefore, the stricter government control in advertising regulations has resulted in the disappearance of the guarantee information cue. It supported Zandpour et al.'s (1994) prediction that television commercials in markets with strict government control would contain less information. To certain extent, this is a healthy sign. It indicates that advertisers are now making efforts to comply to the regulations. In other words, it is now more difficult to make unsubstantiated claims on TV.

Compared to the study conducted in 1993 (Chan, 1995), the present study contained fewer pharmaceutical commercials. One possible reason is the prevalence of problematic medical ads in China. Some provinces have decided to ban all ads about medicine and medical institutes for a certain period of time in order to clear up the mess. For example, the Hunan Provincial Administration for Industry and Commerce banned medical institutes ads in all media from February 11 to April 10, 2002 (China Media Net, 2002a). The Shanghai Provincial Administration for Industry and Commerce banned all medical ads in all media for three months from April 18, 2002 (*Jiefang Daily*, 2002). However, the situation did not improve. According to a report of the SAIC, 98% of the medical services ads in Guangzhou violated the advertising regulations (*Xinkuai News*, 2002). The SAIC also found nearly 100% of medical services ads in Beijing violated the regulations (China Media Net, 2002b). So it is not surprising to see that the number of pharmaceutical commercials dropped significantly in the present study.

Information content continued to be dependent on product category. When product category variable was controlled, there was no significant change in the

percentage of informative commercials between the 1993 and 2002 sample. The reduction in number of information cues in each informative commercial may reflect that creative advertising personnel now recognize that advertising messages on television need to be focused. Instead of putting a vast amount of information cues in one single commercial, they are now putting specific emphasis on one and only one information cue. The percentage of commercials with one information cue increased from 35% in 1993 to 40% in 2002.

The result that level of information was dependent on characteristics of broadcast channels suggests that advertising personnel are mature in designing advertising messages for different market segmentations. Advertisers on national channels are more likely to use emotional appeal while advertisers on regional channels are more likely to use informative appeal. The result was in line with Zhang and Harwood's (2004) finding that national and regional TV commercials used different value appeals. Further research is needed to examine whether such difference exists for global as well as local brands.

The results indicated that level of information was not dependent on duration of commercial, which suggests that time constraint is not an excuse for not providing relevant information. Lack of information is probably due to copy approach, rather than time constraint.

As Chinese consumers continued to be more affluent and experienced, they began to look for intangible value of product and services. As China entered the WTO and the economic conditions continued to improve, there was greater competition as more foreign and international brands entered China market. There is partial evidence that the level of information content continued to decrease as compared to the study in 1993. It is difficult to say whether the decrease in level of information in television advertising is good to consumers or not. Nowadays, people are surrounded by too much information. Audiences may not enjoy commercials with too much information. Instead, they want commercials to be relaxed and entertaining. They may be interested in commercials with symbolic appeals. Further research is needed to explore what kind of information cues consumers like to see or expect to see for television commercials of different product categories. This kind of study would help advertising personnel to formulate various creative strategies to suit different consumers' need.

Recent content analysis indicated that advertising content targeted at the mass market using TV was very different from those targeted at the X-generation using lifestyle magazines in China. Collectivism and traditional values were more pervasive on television than in magazine ads (Zhang & Shavitt, 2003). Further research can be conducted for other advertising media such as newspapers and magazines to map out the changes over the last decade. With such data, we can obtain a clear picture about the changes in all forms of advertising, not just television advertising alone. As the information cues analyzed are mainly from the advertisers' or marketers' standpoint, further research on the perceived information value from the consumers' point of view would be highly useful.

The current study has two limitations. First, only television commercials were studied. Second, commercials were classified as informative if they contained at least one of the 14 information cues. In actual practice, some commercials employed both informative and emotional appeals. Commercials used a prominently emotional approach but at the same time contained information cues that would be classified as informative commercials in the study.

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