

## *Creative Advertising - Narrative in Marketing Communications*

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### **Abstract**

In the 21st century, amidst China's rapid economic development in a new era of digital information; "advertising" should not be a neglected term. Imitations of foreign advertising with a large number of references, celebrity endorsements, copied images and the aesthetic slogan have become the major problems in the domestic advertising market in China. Advertisements which blindly focus on the moment at which design is purposed for consumers to purchase the product ignore the broader possibilities inherent to shaping a unique form of advertising through narration techniques. Chinese advertising designers need to become aware of this shortfall and try to improve on it. At present, in the creative advertising market outside China, the use of creative design methods is not uncommon. Many advertisements utilize creative narrative techniques. This type of advertising, highlighting creative fun in sharing brand personality, is more effective in attracting target audiences than just simply displaying the product. The research proposal is based on 'Creative Advertising – Narrative in Marketing Communications' to investigate the use of 'the story' in creative advertising in the West and analyze its possible application in China. Accordingly, the background of the subject and discusses the importance of creative advertising and its necessity in marketing communication by analyzing the current situation in both China and the West.

Keywords: China, West, economic development, imitation, celebrity, copied images, creative, story

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## **Introduction and Research Background**

Advertising is powerful. It develops with changes in lifestyles and marketing. In the past, much research has lacked theoretical rigor due to an inadequate understanding of the theory of advertising thinking, leading to some disappointing results. Roland Barthes argues that “The advertising of detergents essentially flatters a notion of depth: dirt is no longer stripped from the surface, it is expelled from its most secret cells. All advertising of beauty products is similarly based on a kind of epic representation of the intimate. Those little scientific prefaces, meant to introduce (and to promote) the product, ordain that it clean *in depth*, feed *in depth*, relieve *in depth*, at all costs *infiltrate*” (Barthes, 2012a, p. 89). Barthes' viewpoint is that an explanation and illustration of the scientific depth below the surface has a more convincing power on consumers than superficially demonstrating the benefits of a product. “Hence the notion of depth is a general one, present in every advertisement” (Barthes, 2012a, p. 89). Moreover, advertising thinking should not only pursue superficial effects, to explore its deep theory and essence. In addition, Rodgers and Thorson (2012) state that although there are many approaches to introducing brands, ideas, issues, or politics, advertising is still the most influential method of communication. In conclusion, there is no doubt that advertising in-depth research theory is an essential foundation for the advertisers, especially in China. Without a strong theoretical basis, these advertisements can only transfer interesting visual images. To understand some of the theoretical background is therefore crucial.

### **Key concepts in advertisement**

There are four aspects that combine to form an essential foundation of narrative advertising: message, conflict, character and plot. These elements make up the narrative of advertising. Escalas (1998) states that narrative advertisements are able to convey effectively through catching consumers' attention to promote the appeal of advertised products, and encourage consumers to believe in them. Generally speaking, advertising narrative relates to romance, humour, hope, seriousness, relationships, education, affection and self-esteem and so on. Ideas should be organised in a narrative structure and these are used by advertisements to trigger or elicit thoughts. Research (Chang, 2008; Escalas, 2004; Mattila, 2000; Polyorat, Alden, & Kim, 2007) points out that narrative advertising is more effective than non-narrative advertising.

Narrative storytelling has long been a key aspect of daily life and is widespread in the West. Altstiel and Grow (2015) and Escalas (1998) point out that in the United States almost 62% of advertisements utilise narrative structure. Since every brand has a back story, advertisers need to understand the hidden procedures and effects behind narrative advertising in order to create effective advertising in China. Marchand (1986) points out that it is necessary for advertisers to create their ‘Unique Narrative Storytelling’ methods on the brand marketing strategy. As one strategy of ‘Advertising Thinking’, storytelling has gained a decisive footing in the determination on how brands will be shaped in the future. “Bedtime stories are all about attracting someone's imagination and bringing them someplace else so that you can relax and calm yourself and fall asleep. That's what any advertising or communication should be about. And while there will always be customers to buy the product for functionality alone, layering the functionality with a human story adds meaning, novelty, and imagination to the purchase” (Creamer & Wins, 2009). Narrative is the

approach which allows us to understand the world. Simmons (2016) points out when narrative is utilised, it can help the audience better understand the world and the individual part both the product and they play in it.

A clear message is an indispensable part of the narrative of advertising thinking. Buster (2013) states that narrative concerns characters: associate, transfer and even to heal. Perhaps this is the key reason why stories are very popular and widespread in the world, especially in the West. In the West, narrative has been used to evoke emotion and tie the public to brands for at least twenty years. For instance, Motorola's Virtual Nightclub, utilises the phone as a symbol of status and successful interaction with the audience.

### **Case study in narrative advertising**

In order to be effective narrative advertising must also introduce the notion of conflict. "Conflict is the driving force of a good story. No conflict, no story" (Fog, 2010, p. 35). Chinese people inherently seek harmony and balance in daily life. Most Chinese people are not fond of being out of tune with their surrounding environment. In order to avoid feels anxiety, Chinese people always pursue a situation of harmony. Because of this, sometimes it is difficult to break through in advertising thinking. However, there are a multitude of advertisements that take advantage of conflict plots are seen in the West, for example, Domino's pizza, when the chefs discovered the Pizza dough had run out of, they worried about disappointing customers, hence action was going needed. Through the unique story resonates strongly throughout the company, giving consumers and employees a very definite belief what is their brand values. If the stories desire to captive the eyes and heart, it is necessary to force the conflict to be taken. "The very lifeblood of a story lies in the field of tension between the two outer poles: unpredictable chaos and predictable harmony" (Fog, 2010, p. 36). The more effective the conflict the more impact the advertising will have.

The next key case reserch is the use of character in narrative advertising. This means a story should begin with a main character, whether hero or anti-hero. "A classical structure can be found in storytelling traditions throughout the Western world—from old fashioned folk tales to Hollywood's action-packed blockbusters"(Fog, 2010, p. 39). For example, Robin Hood was a famous hero in England, fighting for freedom and justice. Generally speaking, an outstanding conflict requires a hero and a villain with obstructing situations. In order to allow the audience to identify with either the hero or the villain, it is important to keep the main target audience in mind.

Once messages include conflict and dramatic characters, generally speaking it is then necessary to consider how the story in advertising thinking should progress and how the endings can surprise the public. The fluency of the advertisement is vital to the audience's experience. If advertisement only provides one simple and direct message, it will be lack of attraction. In contrast, an advertisement which have plots the consequences will attract more attentions from its target audience. Deighton, Romer, and McQueen (1989) point out that use the plots in narrative advertisements can evoke audiences' emotion response. Generally speaking, a conventional story can be divided into three components: beginning, middle and end. At first, the context is set. Second, the progression of the development of the story generates conflict. The conflict is more and more intensified but is finally resolved. In addition, Escalas

(1998) states that a narrative is constructed of two critical factors: the first one is causality, the other one is chronology. Causality means combine the story with causal deduction. Chronology signifies that audiences can perceive the contents' beginning, process, and ending in accordance with time. Consequently, narrative advertising transfers the main message according to narrative framework by causality and chronology. Adaval and Wyer (1998) point out that utilizing narrative advertisements can ensure key messages are accepted more easily. A successful advertising will grasp the audience attention and deliver a taste of what is to come by establishing the topic of the story and ensuring its resonance.

There is an advertisement in Australia named "Set Yourself Free" which causes a considerable reaction worldwide. The tactic of this advertisement implies that the children are in danger if they play truant rather than go to school. This advertising was uploaded on the Youtube channel and had more than 500 thousand views in two days and by 2015 had accumulated audiences more than 20 million.

### **Creative strategies in the West and in China**

The start of this advertisement is very harmonious and pleasant; however, the plots changes sharply as well as quite horrible at the end of the advertisement. Unfortunately, the young teenagers are hurt by beach bombs, and at last most of them become disabled, even dead. At the end of this advertising, subtitles are strikingly displayed as: "This is what happens when you slack off, stay in school." Using the explosive and bloody topics to carry out a wide range of dissemination, so that makes the concept of "anti-truancy" more clearly and powerful, it is easier to remember and attract attention for the audience (see table 1). Barthes (1993) points out that the connotation possibly distinct according to the means in which message is presented. This creative strategy of the strong violent element will enhance more attention and memory. "In addition to "perceptive" connotation, hypothetical but possible, one then encounters other, more particular, modes of connotation, and firstly a "cognitive" connotation whose signifiers are picked out, localized, in certain parts of the analogon" (Barthes, 1993, p. 208). It is an important ability for an advertiser to observe things profoundly and clearly; it is imperative to explore the third hidden meaning in advertising; a deeper idea is created to make the audience clearer. "The film begins only where language and metalanguage end" (Barthes, 1978, p. 64). According to Barthes theory, it is crucial to recognise the third meaning in advertising. Barthes (1978) points out that it is necessary to distinguish three stages of meaning: an informational level, a symbolic stage and the sign phase. The advertising has a clear purpose, and this creative method is a kind of 'fear' appeals, in particular, the 'fear' factor can cause a substantial psychological association so that will affect on the public. Meanwhile, the security theme of staying in school has been strengthened since. "And this is duplicity peculiar to bourgeois art: between the intellectual sign and the visceral sign, this art hypocritically arranges an illegitimate sign, at once elliptical and pretentious, which it baptizes with the pompous name *natural*" (Barthes, 2012a, p. 21). The shocking advertisement is created primarily to break through the "clutter" to appeal attention and finally attract viewers into a specific situation.

Additionally, there are three creative approaches can improve attention in an advertisement: sex, violence and bloody. Shocking advertising, on the one hand, it may be negative for some person, on the other hand, it also a positive attraction for

others. “The photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the “art,” or the treatment, or the “writing,” or the rhetoric, of the photograph)” (Barthes, 1993, p. 198). From Barthes’ theory, the two factors need to be paid close attention to an advertiser and the public; sometimes it is necessary to link them together to explain a primary message. Catching the audience with resonance is a responsible for each advertiser and strives to move the key creative strategy across the world. However, this type of advertising is usually controversial, crass and disturbing, especially in developing countries. To some extent, this creative strategy needs challenge conventional society recognition. David Abbott, celebrated writer and founder of Abbott Mead Vickers believe that the fabulous creative ideas are these that include a deeper insight and perception into human behaviour.

Moreover, Altstiel and Grow (2015) point out that there are “four emotive pathways” can be used if tend to convey effective information in advertisements. The four approaches are: vivid story, magical music, embrace humanity and humour. Storytelling makes the audience share its core theme and understand it quickly, and music can have a deeper effect on human beings, the last one is that embed in humour factor in an advertisement. This case advertising uses storytelling; meanwhile, it reveals the characteristics of human nature. However, most of the Chinese advertising is always self-indulging or always meaningless, and far away from the theme or product. In China, few humourous advertisements can be generated. In order to make advertising more effective, perhaps not so much directly to the audience, rather broadcast an unexpected plot can be an effective strategy. “Shocking content in an advertisement significantly increases attention, benefits memory, and positively influences behavior” (Dahl, Frankenberger, & Manchanda, 2003, p. 265). This kind of shocking advertising strategy is not only aggrieving but also can be frightening. Application of appalling strategy and fear factors to deliver a public message will have very high efficiency. However, perhaps sometimes if a viewer discovers that some kinds of advertising messages are menacing or disturbing, these contents could be filtered out. Mattila (2000) point out that new audiences express their favourable opinions through reading narratives rather than rigid contents. Because most life experience can be transferred by narrative methods, so that is the same to trigger narrative and people’s knowledge and eventually this kind of advertising should be accepted and more accessible to process. It is necessary to notice that the contemporary advertising is confronting a ‘genrequake’ as a consequence of a numerous of advertising forms and styles will be shaped in the future. As an advertiser, especially for Chinese advertiser, it is imperative to create novelty advertising that can be competitive in the world in the advertising field.

## **Conclusion**

In order to make an effective ‘conversation’ with the audience, each advertiser requires keeping awareness of what is happening in the world. For viewers, if they have a ‘feeling’, whatever a positive feeling or a negative, it will lead to their action. Whatever a theme or product, it is imperative to consider its long-term effects in target marketing. Using shocking advertising perhaps can affect the audiences’ perception on the topic or a product. Because of the traditional ethics are always predominant to most of the regions in the world that might not be the best approach to broadcast. Although each story has its unique content and characteristics, however, it

is the best way that story perhaps abide four basic constructions: history, contemporary, vision and culture. Each style of storytelling provides a unique visual and plays a different role. All themes or brands can and should strive to follow above factors to plan their strategies in target marketing.

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