

Cultural Values Conveyed Through Celebrity Endorsers: A Content Analysis of Chinese Television Commercials

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This study proposes a content analysis to ascertain the primary cultural values in Chinese celebrity-endorsed and non-celebrity-endorsed television commercials and examine the relationships between celebrities' characteristics and cultural values. Results show that Chinese celebrity ads are dominated by the celebrities who are from the Greater China Region (aka Mainland China) and mainly promote modern and utilitarian values. Celebrity endorsers are most often associated with the values of quality/effectiveness, success/status, beauty/youth, and enjoyment/leisure. Their gender and age are stereotypically presented in advertising messages. The study shows a predictable pattern of matching relations between celebrity endorsers and cultural values and implies that advertisers in China tend to depend on the shared common meanings of celebrities to create advertising messages.

Keywords: celebrity endorsement, Chinese television commercial, cultural value, gender, age, nationality

Introduction

Modern celebrity endorsement advertising originated in the United States in the 1800s (Segrave, 2005). During the last century, it has transcended national borders and become a favorite advertising strategy all over the world (Money, Shimp, & Sakano, 2006). In China, the celebrity endorsement first appeared in Shanghai in the 1930s (Bai, 2002) and disappeared for three decades after the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949 (Hong, 1994). It was not until the end of 1980s that celebrity advertising was reintroduced into China. There are two events that marked the moment. One is Chinese movie actress Pan Hong's endorsement of a cosmetic brand in 1988. The other is Chinese veteran actor Li Moran's appearance in a medicine commercial (Yu & Deng, 1999). Since the late 1990s, with the evolution of consumer culture and celebrity culture in tandem with economic reforms, China has witnessed the proliferation of celebrity advertising (Wang & Chen, 2007). Not only popular entertainers but also athletes and corporation presidents have appeared in various ads. The celebrity endorser has been believed to be the key to success within the Chinese market (Hall, 2013).

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The celebrity endorsement, as a potentially effective advertising strategy, can simplify the process by which the audience interprets an advertising message. Each celebrity possesses a unique set of cultural meanings and can bring the meanings into the product he or she is promoting (McCracken, 1989). In this way, the celebrity can help greatly narrow down the thematic dimensions of meanings related to the product (Langmeyer & Walker, 1991). Previous literature focuses on the matches between celebrities and product categories. Little scholarly attention has been directed toward how a celebrity endorser is associated with the selling idea or the primary cultural value transmitted in an advertisement.

Under the theoretical framework of meaning transfer model, this study proposes a content analysis to ascertain the dominant cultural values reflected in Chinese celebrity-endorsed television commercials and gauge the value differences between celebrity-endorsed and non-celebrity-endorsed commercials. More important, the study examines how celebrities' characteristics (e.g., gender, age, and nationality/locality) are related to the dominant cultural values conveyed in the ads. Many studies have examined the cultural values manifest in Chinese advertising (Chan & Cheng, 2002; Cheng, 1994; Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Lin, 2001; Tse, Belk, & Zhou, 1989; Zhang & Harwood, 2004; Zhang & Shavitt, 2003). None of them, however, were conducted in the context of celebrity endorsement. The importance of the issue lies not only in the increasing popularity of celebrity endorsement in China (Wang & Chen, 2007), but in a celebrity's potential capacity to carry cultural meanings to advertising (McCracken, 1989). The study provides insights into the current status of the implementation of celebrity advertising strategy in China and the manipulation of celebrities' characteristics to create advertising messages.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Celebrity Advertising in China

The phenomenon of celebrity endorsement in the context of the Chinese market has received academic attention since the 1990s. The studies in the past decade have mainly dealt with the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement under the theoretical frameworks of source model, celebrity match-up hypothesis, and consumer-celebrity relationship, and provided strategic implications for marketers and advertisers (He & Zhu, 2013; van der Veen, 2009; Wang & Ma, 2004). For example, an early study was conducted by Wang (1999), who surveyed the college students and advertising practitioners in China to explore the effects of celebrity credibility and celebrity match-up on consumer attitudes toward products and ads. The reputation of a celebrity was found to be a more important criterion than physical attractiveness for predicting the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement. Another study by Huang and her associates (2011) surveyed more than 1,000 Chinese consumers to explore how celebrity-worship affected brand purchase intent. Their findings confirmed that consumer-celebrity relationship is an important antecedent to celebrity endorser effects.

Compared with the studies on the effects of celebrity advertising, less research has been conducted on how celebrity endorsers are presented in relation to other advertising elements, such as products, cultural values, and verbal modes. A recent content analysis of Chinese celebrity-endorsed TV commercials described the distribution of celebrities' gender, age, nationality, area of expertise, and celebrity-endorsed product categories. It noted that celebrities were extensively used to promote different

product categories, with medicine, apparel, and food being the most common (Sun, 2010). The present study adopts the meaning transfer model and goes further to analyze the relationships between celebrities' characteristics and cultural values.

The Meaning Transfer Model

The meaning transfer model, proposed by McCracken (1989), emphasizes the important role that cultural meanings play in the process of messages passing from a celebrity to a product and from a product to a consumer. According to the model, each celebrity has a unique set of meanings, which derive from the type of person he or she is, the specific cultural contexts he or she comes from, the roles he or she has played, and the stories that have developed around him or her (Tellis, 2004). When endorsing a product, a celebrity brings the symbolic meanings to the endorsement process, through which his or her status, class, gender, age, and personality are encoded and transferred to the product. After purchasing the product, the consumers "claim, exchange, care for, and use" (McCracken, 1989, p. 317) the product to appropriate the meanings. Celebrities, by using their constructed selves, serve as a kind of exemplary or inspirational figure to the target consumers (McCracken, 1989). The model proffers "an insightful framework for using the complexity of meaning associated with celebrities" (Tellis, 1998, p. 191). Based on the model, researchers can focus on an extensive spectrum of characteristics owned by celebrities and examine the relationships between cultural values and celebrities' characteristics.

Cultural Values and Celebrities' Characteristics

Advertising, as a privileged form of discourse in modern society (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1990), helps to convey cultural values and shape consumers' motivations, product choices, and lifestyles (Tse et al., 1989). Previous research about the cultural values in Chinese advertising has shown several findings. First, the portrayal of Chinese conventional or traditional values, such as family and tradition, remains relatively stable (Lin, 2001). Second, there is a trend toward showing the coexistence of both traditional and modern values (Zhang & Harwood, 2004). Third, in contrast to U.S ads that show both symbolic and utilitarian values, Chinese ads present symbolic values more frequently (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996).

The cultural values are attached to particular products via a nexus that advertisers establish between "what a culture views as desirable states of being" (Srikandath, 1991, p. 169) and the products. The desirable states can be presented and made salient through a variety of advertising appeals including celebrity endorsements. As informed by the meaning transfer model, celebrities possess symbolic meanings that other types of endorsers (i.e., typical consumers, professional experts, and company presidents) do not have. The dominant cultural values conveyed in celebrity-endorsed ads might be different from those in the ads endorsed by other types of endorsers. The foregoing discussion enlightens the examination and comparison of the values conveyed in celebrity-endorsed and non-celebrity-endorsed ads. The study, poses the following question:

RQ1: What are the primary cultural values conveyed in Chinese celebrity-endorsed and non-celebrity-endorsed television commercials?

Gender, or the social and cultural meanings associated with masculinity and femininity, is a crucial factor in developing advertising messages (Wolin, 2003). Since the 1970s, gender-role stereotyping has been a prominent topic in advertising literature (Ford et al., 1998; Wolin, 2003). Prior studies suggest that men in ads tend to be depicted as independent, tough, ambitious, knowledgeable, powerful, and successful, while women are presented as young, sexy, charming, acquiescent, available, and willing to be subordinate to men (Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Davis, 1990). During the past few decades, the roles of both sexes have been changing as a result of social and economic development (Carroll, 2009). For instance, the dramatic increase in divorce and single status forces some males to do the household shopping, meal preparation, child care, and other traditional female-dominated activities (Rice, 2002). Men have become potential consumers for products traditionally sold to women. With the increased number of women in the workplace, products traditionally marketed to men now are also targeted toward women (Rosin, 2010).

Age is an important demographic dimension. In contrast to the voluminous research on gender portrayal, few studies have examined the depiction of different age groups in advertising. Some studies have primarily concentrated on the image portrayal of elderly characters and found that older people were often unfavorably portrayed (Miller, Leyell, & Mazachek, 2004; Peterson, 1992; Robert & Zhou, 1997; Zhou & Chen, 1992). Specifically, the current study poses the following questions:

RQ2: What are the primary cultural values that male and female celebrities are often associated with in Chinese television commercials?

RQ3: What are the primary cultural values that celebrities of different age groups are often associated with in Chinese television commercials?

The globalization of the advertising industry stimulates the circulation of global appeals in the world market (Wang, 2000; Zhou & Belk, 2002). The symbolic meanings that celebrities possess are rooted in the culture in which they have achieved their eminence. Chinese local celebrities and foreign celebrities seem to be interpreted by Chinese consumers in different ways (Pollay, Tse, & Wang, 1990). In recent years, more and more Chinese ads have used globally recognized elements—for example, well-known Western stars—to convey specific cultural values (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Zhou & Belk, 2004). Thus the following question is proposed:

RQ4: What are the primary cultural values that celebrities of different nationalities or localities are often associated with in Chinese television commercials?

Methodology

Sampling

The commercials sampled in this study aired during prime time on China Central Television (CCTV). In 2009, CCTV broadcasting covered approximately 97% of the total Chinese population, representing a potential audience of more than 1.2 billion (Chen, 2010). Its advertising revenue hit 16.2 billion yuan (about US\$2.44 billion) (Hu, 2012). Television ads were collected mainly from CCTV channels 1, 2, and 5. The rates of access to the three channels are higher than those of the other CCTV channels in major Chinese cities (Institute of Journalism and Communication China Academy of Social Sciences, 2003). Each channel has specific program content and a distinct target audience, which suggests that these channels are advertising hosts for different products. CCTV1 is a general channel with a mixture of various programs including news, serials, documentaries, and entertainment shows. The audience is made up of middle-aged and senior individuals of all classes. CCTV2 specializes in economic and financial content. Its audience is mainly composed of the middle- and upper-class viewers. CCTV5 is a sports channel and primarily targets sports fans of all ages.

Three weeks' worth of programs on CCTV channel 1, 2, and 5 were digitally recorded during the time period of 6 to 10 p.m., which is Chinese television prime time. Recording took place the second week of March, July, and November in 2011. CCTV sells advertising time on a monthly basis. Thus the three different months were included to augment the sample size. Moreover, programs were purposely sampled from different seasons to increase the variety of product categories. One week was sampled from each month purposely to avoid holidays and festivals.

The rotation principle was applied to maximize the representation of the ads aired by these channels. For example, on the first Sunday, CCTV1 was recorded from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., and CCTV2 from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. On the next day, CCTV5 was recorded from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., and CCTV1 from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. Within the three selected weeks, there were no festivals or holidays to influence the generalizability of the collected data. During the Chinese traditional holidays—for example, the Chinese Lunar New Year—marketing practitioners may adjust their advertising strategies to cater to the holiday atmosphere no matter what products they promote.

For commercials featuring the same celebrity endorsers but promoting different brands, each was taken as an independent sample. All the incomplete or truncated ads and the trailers for television series, entertainment shows, and movies were removed. Any duplicate ads were excluded to reduce redundancies. As a result, in the 84 hours of programming, a total of 719 commercials was initially collected and further categorized into two groups: 177 celebrity-endorsed ads (specifically, 156 ads featuring one celebrity and 21 ads featuring two or more celebrities) and 542 non-celebrity-endorsed ads. The maximum length for these ads was around 30 seconds and the minimum was around 5 seconds. The lengths of most ads were between 10 and 15 seconds. All the celebrity ads were trimmed from the original videos, which resulted in approximate 50 minutes of programming. These ads promoted approximately 25 product categories. The most frequently endorsed products included medicines, food, soft drinks, apparel, cosmetics, personal hygiene products, digital products, motor vehicles, home electronics, and appliances.

Coding Scheme

All the sample commercials were coded on the variable of cultural value. Only the primary cultural value was coded for each ad, an approach based on an assumption that each ad would focus on a single or dominant cultural value and that value would be identifiable. The assumption was rooted in the basic practice principle for effective advertising and was also verified by the previous empirical literature. The 14 themes of cultural values were adapted mainly from prior studies (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Zhang & Harwood, 2004; Zhang, Song, & Carver, 2008) and further modified to fit the current sample. They were grouped in three cultural value categories—Chinese traditional, modern, and utilitarian—mainly based on the Chinese Value Survey (CVS) that has developed a measure of values that reflect indigenous concerns of Chinese culture (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). As a result, the seven value themes under the traditional value category are group belongingness, economy, filial piety, health, knowledge, patriotism, and tradition. The six value themes under the modern value category are beauty/youth, enjoyment/leisure, modernity/technology, naturalness, sexuality, and success/status. Under the utilitarian category is the value theme of quality/effectiveness (see appendix).

Only the ads featuring one celebrity were coded on the variables of gender, age, and nationality/locality. The ads containing multiple celebrities were excluded because they usually represented different genders, ages, or nationalities/localities of celebrities. Celebrity gender was regarded as a binary construct in this study. Celebrity age was defined as his or her actual age. It was classified into five major categories: children, adolescents, young adults (age 20–39), mature adults (age 40–59), and elderly adults (age 60 plus). Celebrity nationality or locality was coded into five categories: Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Asian countries, and Western countries. When the two coders failed to achieve agreement on an item, they were instructed to code it as “unable to determine.”

Coding Procedure

Two bilingual Chinese college students familiar with popular celebrities were recruited to code all the sampled celebrity and non-celebrity-endorsed ads. They were trained for more than 10 hours to apply the coding scheme to a set of practice ads. During the coding process, they were provided with a codebook containing detailed operational definitions of each variable and category. They worked independently of each other and were not told the research purpose. In the current research design, most measures (i.e., gender, age, and nationality/locality) are the manifest content and involve only the coders' recording of quantifiable facts. The coders were instructed to search online for information about each celebrity's exact age and original nationality/locality. The cultural value is the projective content that requires the coders' interpretation of the content meanings. The coders were instructed to get familiar enough with the definition of each cultural value theme. Cultural values usually manifest in the voice-over, video footage, and copy of a television commercial (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996).

The coders were instructed to take all these factors into consideration and watch each ad more than once until they could identify the dominant theme. The coding task relies more on the coders' judgments based on their own schemas (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Inconsistent coding was resolved through discussions involving the author until agreement was achieved. A sufficient degree of

intercoder reliability was established during the pilot coding process, in which the two coders coded 50 randomly selected commercials. Cohen's Kappa was calculated to assess their agreement. The intercoder reliability for each variable was satisfactory (Kappa = 1 for "gender"; Kappa = .935 for "age"; Kappa = .945 for "nationality/ locality; Kappa = .878 for "cultural value").

Results

Cultural Values Conveyed in Celebrity and Non-Celebrity Ads

The primary cultural values conveyed in Chinese celebrity-endorsed and non-celebrity-endorsed television commercials are shown in Table 1. Modern values were most frequently presented in celebrity ads (55.93%), followed by utilitarian (25.99%) and traditional values (18.08%) ($\chi^2 = 42.339, p < .001$). A post hoc power analysis indicates 85% of statistical power (using the G*Power software). The sample size of celebrity-endorsed ads obtained was appropriate in detecting differences among value categories. The most frequently used value category in non-celebrity ads was also modern values (43.91%), followed by traditional values (36.90%) and utilitarian values (19.19%) ($\chi^2 = 52.797, p < .001$). Of the 14 specific value themes, the most prevalent ones in celebrity-endorsed ads were quality/effectiveness (25.99%), success/status (15.25%), enjoyment/leisure (16.38%), beauty/youth (11.29%), and health (7.91%). The least frequently presented themes were filial piety and patriotism.

In non-celebrity ads, the values of quality/effectiveness (19.19%), modernity (15.68%), enjoyment/leisure (13.10%), and group belongingness (10.33%) were used more often, whereas the values of sexuality, knowledge, economy, and success/status were least used. Comparing the value themes manifest in the two groups, quality/effectiveness, success/status, beauty/youth, enjoyment/leisure, sexuality, health, and economy had higher occurrence rates in celebrity endorsed ads than in non-celebrity-endorsed ads.

Table 1. Cultural Values in Celebrity and Non-Celebrity-Endorsed Ads.

Value categories	Value themes	Celebrity commercials (<i>n</i> = 177)		Non-celebrity commercials (<i>n</i> = 542)	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Traditional values	Group belongingness	7	3.95	56	10.33
	Economy	6	3.39	14	2.58
	Filial piety	0	0	20	3.69
	Health	14	7.91	41	7.56
	Knowledge	2	1.13	13	2.40
	Patriotism	0	0	18	3.32
	Tradition	3	1.69	38	7.01
	SUBTOTAL	32	18.08	200	36.90
Modern values	Beauty/youth	20	11.29	29	5.35
	Enjoyment/leisure	29	16.38	71	13.10
	Modernity/technology	10	5.65	85	15.68
	Naturalness	5	2.82	32	5.90
	Sexuality	8	4.52	5	.92
	Success/status	27	15.25	16	2.95
	SUBTOTAL	99	55.93	238	43.91
Utilitarian values	Quality/effectiveness	46	25.99	104	19.19
χ^2 (<i>df</i> =2)		42.339***		52.797***	

Note: χ^2 values indicate differences in the frequencies of each value category in celebrity ads and non-celebrity ads, respectively.

****p* < .001

Cultural Values by Celebrity's Gender

As noted in Table 2, the major cultural values manifest in the commercials featuring male celebrities were quality/effectiveness (32.14%), success/status (26.19%), and enjoyment/leisure (11.90%). These values accounted for almost three-fourths (70.23%) of the occurrences. Female celebrities were often associated with quality/effectiveness (25.00%), beauty/youth (25.00%), enjoyment/leisure (13.89%), health (9.72%), and sexuality (9.72%), which together accounted for more than three-fourths (83.33%) of the occurrences. Males were significantly more likely to be associated

with the value of success/status ($X^2 = 14.440, p < .001$) than females. Females were found to more often advocate the values of beauty/youth ($X^2 = 12.800, p < .001$) and sexuality ($X^2 = 4.500, p < .05$). No significant difference was found between genders in terms of the three value categories.

Table 2. Cultural Values by Gender.

Value categories	Value themes	Gender				X^2 (<i>df</i> = 1)
		Male (<i>n</i> = 84)		Female (<i>n</i> = 72)		
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Traditional values	Group belongingness	4	4.76	2	2.78	.667
	Economy	1	1.19	2	2.78	.333
	Health	5	5.95	7	9.72	.333
	Knowledge	2	2.38	0	0	
	Tradition	2	2.38	1	1.39	.333
	SUBTOTAL	14	16.66	12	16.66	.154
Modern values	Beauty/youth	2	2.38	18	25.00	12.800***
	Enjoyment/leisure	10	11.90	10	13.89	.000
	Modernity/technology	6	7.14	4	5.56	.400
	Naturalness	2	2.38	0	0	
	Sexuality	1	1.19	7	9.72	4.500*
	Success/status	22	26.19	3	4.17	14.440***
	SUBTOTAL	43	51.19	42	58.33	.012
Utilitarian values	Quality/effectiveness	27	32.14	18	25.00	1.800

Note: X^2 values indicate differences in the frequencies of each value theme and value category across genders.

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Cultural Values by Celebrity's Age

Young adults aged 20 to 39 (58.97%) and mature adults aged 40 to 59 (37.18%) comprised the majority of the celebrity endorsers. Only six ads (3.85%) featured celebrities aged 60 or older. The groups of elderly and mature adults were combined to support reliable statistical analysis. As indicated in Table 3, in terms of the value categories, modern values were significantly more often associated with young adults ($X^2 = 11.306, p < .01$), while traditional values were significantly more often associated with

mature and elderly adults ($X^2 = 3.846, p < .05$). With regard to the value themes, mature and elderly adults were used mainly to promote the values of quality/effectiveness (26.69%), success/status (18.75%), health (14.06%), and enjoyment/leisure (9.38%). Young adults were often related to the values of quality/effectiveness (28.26%), beauty/youth (17.39%), enjoyment/leisure (15.22%), and success/status (14.13%). Compared with mature and elderly adults, young adults were significantly more often depicted with the values of beauty/youth ($X^2 = 7.200, p < .01$) and sexuality ($X^2 = 4.500, p < .05$).

Table 3. Cultural Values by Age.

Value categories	Value themes	Age				X^2 (<i>df</i> = 1)
		Young adults (20–39) (<i>n</i> = 92)		Mature & elderly adults (40 plus) (<i>n</i> = 64)		
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Traditional values	Group belongingness	2	2.17	4	6.25	.667
	Economy	1	1.09		3.13	.333
	Health	3	3.26	9	14.06	3.000
	Knowledge	2	2.17	0	0	
	Tradition	0	0	3	4.69	
	SUBTOTAL		8	8.69	18	28.13
Modern values	Beauty/youth	16	17.39	4	6.25	7.200**
	Enjoyment/leisure	14	15.22	6	9.38	3.200
	Modernity/technology	6	6.52	4	6.25	.400
	Naturalness	2	2.17	0	0	
	Sexuality	7	7.61	1	1.56	4.500*
	Success/status	13	14.13	12	18.75	.040
	SUBTOTAL		58	63.04	27	42.19
Utilitarian values	Quality/effectiveness	26	28.26	19	29.69	1.089

Note: X^2 values indicate differences in the frequencies of each value theme and value category across age groups.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Cultural Values by Celebrity's Nationality/Locality

Since most celebrities were from Mainland China (64.10%), very low frequencies of cultural values were found in most cells when the data were presented using the original five nationality/locality categories. Hence the variable was collapsed into three groups: Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and foreign countries. As shown in Table 4, modern values were used most across the groups. In the ads featuring Mainland Chinese celebrities, the top value themes were quality/effectiveness (41%), success/status (12%), enjoyment/leisure (11%), and beauty/youth (10%). In the ads endorsed by celebrities from Taiwan and Hong Kong, almost three-quarters (73.17%) of the value themes fell into the modern category. This group appeared to be frequently associated with the values of success/status (26.83%), beauty/youth (17.07%), and enjoyment/leisure (14.63%). Celebrities from foreign countries were predominantly associated with the modern value category (93.33%).

Table 4. Cultural Value by Celebrity's Nationality/Locality.

Value categories	Value themes	Celebrity's nationality/locality					
		Mainland China (n = 100)		Taiwan & Hong Kong (n = 41)		Foreign countries (n = 15)	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Traditional values	Group belongingness	3	3.00	3	7.31	0	0
	Economy	2	2.00	0	0	1	6.67
	Health	8	8.00	4	9.76	0	0
	Knowledge	2	2.00	0	0	0	0
	Tradition	3	3.00	0	0	0	0
	SUBTOTAL	18	18.00	7	17.07	1	6.67
Modern values	Beauty/youth	10	10.00	7	17.07	3	20.00
	Enjoyment/leisure	11	11.00	6	14.63	3	20.00
	Modernity/technology	4	4.00	4	9.76	2	13.33
	Naturalness	1	1.00	0	0	1	6.67
	Sexuality	3	3.00	2	4.88	3	20.00
	Success/status	12	12.00	11	26.83	2	13.33
SUBTOTAL	41	41.00	30	73.17	14	93.33	
Utilitarian values	Quality/effectiveness	41	41.00	4	9.76	0	0

Discussion

Television commercials featuring Chinese celebrities were associated with 3 broad cultural value categories and 12 cultural value themes. Modern values were presented significantly more often than utilitarian and traditional values. Celebrity endorsers showed closer associations with the values of success/status, beauty/youth, and sexuality than non-celebrity endorsers did. Three aspects may explain this finding: the formation of modern celebrity culture, the schema people have developed for celebrities, and the effectiveness of a celebrity endorser's physical attractiveness.

First, the formation of celebrity culture is closely articulated with the development of commodity culture (Smart, 2005). Lowenthal (2006) calls the past heroes "idols of production" and labels present-day celebrities as "idols of consumption." Celebrities themselves are commodities in the sense that they are the objects of consumer desire in the market of sentiments (Rojek, 2001). Furthermore, celebrities are tied to commodity consumption in that they cultivate desiring consumers. As noted by Boorstin (1963), celebrities are marketable celebrated models. When they are employed to convey the values of success/status, beauty/youth, and sexuality in ads, they may fill the audience with powerful cravings and encourage them to emulate their consumption behaviors. Second, celebrity endorsers enjoy widespread public recognition. In a particular society, people may hold a set of assumptions related to celebrities and have well-developed individual person schema for them (Scott, 1994; Speck, Schumann, & Thompson, 1988). The values of success/status, beauty/youth, and sexual attractiveness appear to be important integrated nodes in most people's schema for celebrities in general. Third, previous research has demonstrated that physically attractive communicators are more favorable in changing and converting beliefs (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Basil, Solomon, & Ashmore, 1994). The attractiveness attribute of a celebrity is often exploited by advertisers to encourage consumers' positive evaluations of an ad and a product.

Quality/effectiveness was the most prevalent value theme in both celebrity and non-celebrity ads. The value is product-oriented and stresses a product's features and performance. Its popularity reflects the current early stage of the Chinese advertising industry (Zhang & Harwood, 2004). Celebrities, as the primary information source in celebrity-endorsed ads, may often be portrayed as experts or user recommenders. Their credibility, likeability, and knowledgeability may be easily transferred onto a product and influence consumers' evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of the product.

Gender Role Stereotyping

Female celebrities were an important symbol of beauty/youth and sexuality. Male celebrities dominated the ads that primarily transmitted the value of success/status. The findings conform to previous gender studies, which note that male characters are usually depicted in professional and successful roles, while females are often portrayed as sex objects and as concerned with physical attractiveness (Furnham & Mak, 1999; Goffman, 1976; Wong & Chan, 2006). The gender role portrayals in ads not only reflect the gender politics in real life, but also create or reinforce images of unrealistic gender stereotypes (Kim & Lowry, 2005). The way in which many celebrities achieve their fame has nothing to do with their gender. Ordinary people, however, may interpret and celebrate a celebrity's fame

and success in a gender-related manner (Turner, 2004). In Chinese advertising, male and female celebrity endorsers seemingly are first differentiated by gender and later assigned typical gender images that most target consumers are ready to accept and identify with. To a certain extent, male celebrities' strong association with success/status and females' association with beauty/youth and sexuality are the result of the convergence of advertisers' and consumers' perceptions of typical gender images. Celebrated beautiful, young, sexy women and celebrated successful, noble men—the two typical idealized gender images—appear to be what Chinese advertisers seek to glamorize and reinforce in commercials.

Meanings Represented by Young and Mature Celebrities

Elderly people were underrepresented in Chinese celebrity-endorsed ads. The result is consistent with prior research on generic advertising, which suggests that older people are often ignored in mainstream advertising (Zhou & Meng, 1998). The phenomenon may be relevant to the ephemeral nature of a celebrity's fame. Most entertainment and sports celebrities acquire their fame when they are young or middle-aged and few can keep it untarnished until age 60 plus. For advertisers, the pool of older celebrities is much smaller than that of younger celebrities.

As expected, mature and elderly adult celebrities were significantly more often associated with traditional values, while young celebrities were significantly more often seen to advocate modern values. Across human cultures, elderly people are generally believed to be the self-appointed guardians of traditional values and ethics, while young people usually have the innate power to challenge, change, or breakdown traditions and norms. Additionally, it is not surprising to find that mature and elderly adult celebrities were most often used to promote the value of quality/effectiveness. In Chinese culture, age means more experience, power, credibility, and authority. As people age, they become more concerned with pragmatic issues and more quality-conscious (Light, 1990). In a general sense, mature and elderly adult celebrities have psychologically grown up and stepped into a period of stable career and personal life. They are usually thought to be more responsible and cautious about endorsing a product. However, in marketing terms, *age* is not a sexy word. For example, in the cosmetic and fashion market aging is usually associated with loneliness, ugliness, and having no zest for life. Hence models featured in cosmetic ads are often 10 to 15 years younger than the target audience (Puustinen, 2004). This explains the close association between the values of beauty/youth and sexuality and young adult celebrities.

Eastern Faces Versus Western and Universal Values

Mainland Chinese celebrities were a primary staple as advertising endorsers. Though not exotic, they have the advantage of being quickly recognized and accepted by Chinese consumers. Over one-fourth of the ads were hyped by celebrities from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Less than one-tenth were endorsed by foreign celebrities. In celebrity ads, using foreign endorsers is not as popular as prior studies suggest (Zhou & Belk, 2002; Zhou & Meng, 1998). The foreign celebrities in this study were found to be predominantly associated with the values of modernity/technology, enjoyment/leisure, success/status, beauty/youth, and sexuality. The result, on the one hand, is in line with previous observations that foreign elements, especially European and American ones, are usually read by Chinese consumers as a kind of shorthand of modern and cosmopolitan values (Li, 2008). On the other hand, it demonstrates the

matching-up of celebrity information and advertising messages. The matching relations between the cultural values and the celebrities from Taiwan and Hong Kong show a somewhat complex pattern. The majority of these celebrities were used in a similar way to the foreign celebrities in terms of modern values. Nearly one-fifth of them were used to promote traditional values, specifically, group belongingness and health. It implies that in comparison with Mainland Chinese celebrities, they are believed to be more qualified to promote modern values and equally qualified to advocate Chinese traditional values.

Less than one-fifth of Mainland Chinese celebrities were employed to promote traditional values. Past research notes that the local appeals represented in Chinese generic ads are usually thought to be able to evoke traditional values (Zhou, Zhou, & Xue, 2005). This study fails to support the argument when Mainland Chinese celebrities are taken as a typical local appeal. However, celebrities as a modern cross-cultural phenomenon, independent of where they originally come from, share a stable set of meanings—for example, fashion, individuality, freedom, success, social status, and wealth (Boorstin, 2006)—which is an integrated part of the modern value system.

The cultural value categories also can be grouped as Eastern, Western, and universal values. According to Wang and his associates (1997), the values based on Chinese traditional culture are classified as Eastern. Western values include beauty, sexuality, modernity, status, leisure, and other appeals consistent with Western cultures. Universal or neutral values mainly refer to product attribute values. In this sense, it is interesting to note that the celebrity ads in Mainland China were dominated by Eastern faces (namely, from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) but most likely to convey Western and universal values. Li (2008) has observed the mixing of Chinese and foreign elements in Chinese ads—for example, integrating foreign models into advertising messages to convey the Chinese value of the grand unity of the world (*tianxia datong*). This study implies another type of connection between Chinese and foreign elements: specifically, Chinese celebrity images and Western and universal values. According to Chiou (2002), the link between traditional cultural values and advertising content has been gradually weakened in some Eastern societies. In other words, Western cultural values are steadily replacing the dominant role of Eastern values in advertising (Chiou, 2002). In China, the trend seems to have found its way into both celebrity-endorsed and non-celebrity-endorsed ads.

Conclusion

This study examined the cultural values reflected in both celebrity and non-celebrity television commercials and the relationships between cultural values and celebrity characteristics. Several important conclusions have emerged: First, modern values dominated both celebrity and non-celebrity television commercials in China. Second, celebrity-endorsed ads were most often related to the values of quality/effectiveness, success/status, beauty/youth, and enjoyment/leisure. Third, celebrity gender and age were stereotypically associated with specific cultural values, which imply that celebrity endorsers are not treated differently from the other types of endorsers in terms of gender and age when advertising messages are created. Celebrated beautiful, young, sexy women and celebrated successful men were identified as the highlighted gender images. Fourth, the celebrity ads in Mainland China were dominated by the celebrities who were from Greater China Region and mainly promoted Western and universal values.

The study shows a predictable pattern in the matching relations between celebrity endorsers and cultural values. It enriches the meaning transfer model in terms of how advertisers use celebrities as meaning carriers. As elaborated earlier, the model stresses that each celebrity possesses a unique set of meanings as a result of random combinations of the celebrity's different characteristics (McCracken, 1989). Although the concept of uniqueness in the model may function well in understanding individual consumers' differentiated perceptions of a celebrity, it is not applicable to explain the homogenous matching patterns between celebrity endorsers and cultural values identified in this study. The study implies that advertisers in China tend to depend on the shared common meanings of celebrities to create advertising messages. It also suggests that the different characteristics of celebrities are not equally weighted; for example, a female celebrity's physical attractiveness may be more valued and sought after than her other characteristics.

Some limitations are worth mentioning. First, in terms of cultural value themes, it might have been more appropriate to locate them on a continuum that bridges tradition and modernity rather than to sort them based on a dichotomy. On a bipolar continuum, different cultural value themes might differentiate in their distances from the two polar points. However, with the method of content analysis, the cultural values have to be defined in a categorical way. Second, the study merely focuses on a few characteristics of celebrity endorsers. It might be interesting and culturally insightful to ask how other characteristics—for example, area of expertise and reputation—are related to cultural values. Additionally, the results obtained are about celebrity endorsers, a special group of advertising models, and cannot be generalized to include other types of endorsers. A horizontal comparison between different types of endorsers might deepen our observations with regard to advertisers' use of celebrities.

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Appendix:

Definitions of the Identified Values in Chinese Television Commercials

Traditional Values

Group belongingness: Emphasis is placed on the individual in relation to others typically in the reference group. Individuals are depicted as integral parts of the group.

Economy: Emphasis is placed on the inexpensive, affordable, and cost-saving nature of a product.

Filial piety: The commercial present a positive model of old age and/or suggests that the product should be purchased for elders to show love and respect.

Health: Use of the product will enhance the vitality, strength, and soundness of the body and make individuals free from disease.

Knowledge: Emphasis is placed on the educational and informational function of a product. Use of the product will improve knowledge or wisdom.

Patriotism: Emphasis is placed on the love of and loyalty to China as a country.

Tradition: The product is associated with the qualities of being classic, historical, time-honored, legendary, venerable, and nostalgic.

Modern Values

Beauty/youth: Emphasis is placed on a product's ability to make individuals appear attractive, elegant, handsome, young, and rejuvenated.

Enjoyment/leisure: Use of the product will bring one relaxation (e.g., rest, vacations, holidays) and enjoyment (e.g., fun, happiness, celebration).

Modernity/technology: The commercial emphasizes the product's attributes of being new, contemporary, modern, progressive, advanced, up-to-date, or ahead of its time. The commercial may present the sophisticated technology used in manufacturing the product.

Naturalness: The commercial emphasizes the product's attributes of being pure, organic, and unadulterated and encourages environmentally preferable purchasing.

Sexuality: The commercial uses glamorous and sensual models and stresses the attractiveness of a clearly sexual nature.

Success/status: Use of the product will elevate users' social position or rank in the eyes of others, and make individuals feel in control of their lives, or enable them to achieve their life goals.

Utilitarian Values

Quality/effectiveness: Emphasis is placed on the effectiveness, excellence, and durability of a product.

Note: The categories and definitions are adapted from the previous studies by Cheng and Schweitzer (1996), Zhang and Harwood (2004), and Zhang, Song, and Carver (2008).