

A Study of Chinese Advertising Forms Based on the Evolution of Promotional Media: Focused on Coca-Cola Advertisements

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Abstract:

With the continuous influx of imported products into the Chinese market, the consumption trends and cultural ideologies of the public are inevitably influenced. This article analyzes Coca-Cola advertisements in different media forms based on the classification and characteristics of promotional media, focusing on five forms of advertising. The study explores the evolving characteristics of Coca-Cola advertisements in China from 1978 to 2020, considering the changing trends in promotional media. It identifies the shifts in advertising forms and highlights the current trends in advertising expression. By delving into the impact of different media forms on the field of advertising during various periods, this research aims to lay the groundwork for future studies on advertising expressions.

Keywords:

Promotional Media, Advertising Expression, Coca-Cola Advertisements

1. Introduction

With the development of science and technology and the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, an increasing number of high-tech products have entered people's field of vision. At the World Economic Forum (WEF) held in Davos, Switzerland in January 2016, the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" became the central theme. At this Davos Forum, autonomous vehicles, artificial intelligence, 3D printers, and the Internet of Things were regarded as the core of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and it was predicted that technological integration would rapidly bring about industrial transformation [1]. The development of technology naturally has different impacts on various fields. In recent years, China, as a populous country, has also become a major consumer of products, making it an area worthy of attention and research. Since the opening-up policy in 1978, China has continuously pursued technological innovation and development, achieving remarkable scientific and technological advancements over the past 40 years. The rapid development of the

country has brought significant changes to the lifestyle of the general public. From black and white televisions in 1978 to today's smart TVs, from radios to various wireless players, and from reading newspapers to various mobile apps and internet platforms where news can be accessed anytime, anywhere, the ways in which the general public receives information have undergone tremendous changes. Different media are used to advertise products, leading the public to make purchasing decisions. Along with people's evolving demands for products, product information can be disseminated through various media. Different media formats are utilized in the process of conveying information to the public, taking into account the current cultural environment and consumer demands. To persuade the public to make purchases, advertisements need to find suitable forms of expression in the media for promotion.

Coca-Cola serves as a symbol of youthfulness and modernity in the context of China's reform and opening-up. With the continuous influx of imported products into the Chinese market, popular consumption trends and cultural ideologies have been influenced. Coca-Cola's success in the Chinese market can be representative of imported products. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of changing media formats on advertising styles from 1978 to 2020 in different periods, starting from Coca-Cola product advertisements in China. The study aims to identify the influence of different media on the evolution of advertising styles and to propose directions for the changing trends in advertising styles and the current characteristics of advertising formats. Based on this, an in-depth understanding of the impact of various media on the field of advertising is attempted, laying the foundation for future research on advertising styles.

The methodology of this study involves two main steps. First, through a review of existing literature, an exploration of the changing landscape of media in China over the past 40 years was conducted. Simultaneously, focusing on the forms of advertising, the study examined the classifications and characteristics of these forms. Second, based on this theoretical investigation, case studies were conducted to identify the distinct features and media techniques employed in Coca-Cola advertisements during different periods. A comparative analysis was performed to understand the impact of advertising media on the evolving forms of expression. The scope of this research encompasses representative commercial advertisements of Coca-Cola across various media platforms in China from 1978 to 2020.

2. Advertising Media

2.1. Classification of Promotional Media

Promotional media refer to mass communication tools with the purpose of advertising. The concept was initially introduced by American communication scholars Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in 1948. In their paper titled "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action," they stated: "People generally believe that mass media is a powerful tool that can be used for both good and evil." [2]. Promotional media has two main meanings: firstly, it refers to tools for disseminating information, such as telephones, newspapers, the internet, radio, and television. Secondly, it refers to institutions that facilitate information dissemination, such as newspapers, radio stations, and television networks [3]. Promotional media are the means used by businesses to directly or indirectly promote, persuade, and remind consumers about the goods and brands they sell [4]. These media serve as a

two-way communication channel between businesses and consumers, facilitating the exchange of products and brands and generating resonance. They also guide consumer responses [5]. With changes in the media landscape and the advent of new media, media can be classified into news media and broadcast media. Media can be further categorized as direct media and indirect media. Direct media include newspapers, brochures, catalogs, direct mail (DM), public relations films and videos, events, observation, periodicals, television, and radio, among others [6].

2.2. Characteristics of Promotional Media

Different advertising media possess their own strengths and weaknesses. Newspapers offer the advantage of achieving rapid advertising results and high market flexibility; however, they face challenges in target segmentation and tend to have a scattered readership, leading to potential wastage. Television stands out as the most persuasive medium, ensuring a broad audience and rapid information dissemination. Yet, its drawback lies in the high production costs and stringent limitations. Radio, with its low advertising cost, caters to diverse listener preferences, allowing for various ad lengths and the use of distinctive voiceovers. However, it suffers from weak penetration, lacks visual impact, and reaches a dispersed audience. Internet media, known for its unlimited information dissemination capabilities, precise targeting of audiences, high interactivity, and potential cost-effectiveness, is considered the most crucial medium.

As shown in Table 1, scholars Backer and Gronne conducted a comparison of major media based on five criteria: reach, selectivity (the degree to which the audience can be segmented), feedback, information volume, and cost. Building upon this, scholar Thomsen introduced a measurable effectiveness scale to further compare the characteristics of different media.

Table 1. Characteristics of the media.

Media	Reach	Selectivity	Feedback	Information volume	Cost	Measurability
News	High	Medium	Low	Medium	High	Low
Television	Very high	Very low	Very low	Low	Low	Low
Radio	High	Low	Very low	Very low	Very low	Very low
DM	Very low	Very high	Low	Medium	Very high	High
Magazine	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	High	Medium
Internet	Low	High	Very high	Very high	Very low	Very high

Source: Baker & Groneem(1996), Thomsen(1996)

3. Forms of Advertising Expression

Advertising drives consumers through information, which can be defined as the messages, ideas, emotions, skills, etc., that communicators want to convey to consumers [7]. To create effective advertisements, it is essential to choose appropriate forms of advertising expression based on product characteristics and consumer lifestyles and purchasing habits [8]. Advertisements consist of various visual elements that form an informational composition. Visual elements can be categorized into content elements and stylistic elements [9]. The evolution of promotional media can lead to differences in the content expression of advertisements. The forms of expression in fashion advertising photos include straightforward expressions, sensory

expressions, symbolic image expressions, narrative expressions, dramatic and impactful image expressions, and sexual expressions [10]. Based on the methods of representation, advertisements can be categorized into literal representation, metaphorical representation, sexual symbolism, and surreal representation. In terms of expressive forms, they can be classified as illustrative expression, sensory expression, and creative expression [11]. Image expressions include product hints, ample imagery, dramatic or impactful imagery, everyday extrapolation, unfolding storylines, sensory expression, and emotional expression [12].

In summary, advertising expression can be categorized into five forms: illustrative expression, sensory expression, emotional expression, everyday experience expression, and symbolic expression. Characteristics of each of these five forms are explained separately, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Advertising expression.*

Form	Content characteristics
Illustrative expression	Explain the development, materials, and use of a new product, etc.
Sensory expression	The human body communicates information through five sensory systems: visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, and tactile.
Emotional expression	Fostering a sense of closeness through emotional resonance (such as love, kinship, and friendship).
Everyday experience expression	Connecting the model with products through daily life experiences.
Symbolic expression	Expressed through virtual images and environments, surrealism, abstract patterns, etc.

4. Coca-Cola Advertising Expression in the Context of Media Transformation

4.1. Mainstream Media in Different Eras

(1) 1978 - 1989

Before 1978, China was in the stage of developing agricultural production, with farmers and rural areas as the focus of national development. 1978 marked a turning point in Chinese social development [13]. In the early to mid-1980s, the focus of Chinese reforms shifted to rural areas. During this period, Chinese rural families had just solved the problem of basic food and clothing, and urban household incomes primarily relied on wages, resulting in relatively small income disparities. Advertising played a crucial role in guiding urban residents' consumption. In urban households during the 1980s, television consumption started to become widespread. Television dramas became the primary cultural consumer product. In the early 1980s, radio was the most important electronic medium in rural society, maintaining its strong influence from the pre-reform and opening-up era [14].

(2) 1990 - 1999

After 1992, with the development of the market economy, residents' consumption levels significantly increased, marking China's era of durable goods production and consumption. The production and consumption of necessities took a back seat. In 1993, urban residents' average annual per capita consumption expenditure was 2480 yuan. In the same year, rural residents' average annual per capita consumption expenditure was 774 yuan. By 1995, urban residents in China owned an average of 89.79 color televisions per hundred households, while rural residents owned 16.92

color televisions per hundred households [15]. In the context of a market economy, people became increasingly open-minded towards the media market. In the early 1990s, rock music continued to be popular among the youth. In the mid-1990s, karaoke became widespread, and VCDs became a new favorite in media consumption. Television remained the primary source of information in the early 1990s. China entered the internet era in the late 1990s. After 1998, with the establishment of numerous commercial websites, China's internet industry experienced rapid development.

(3) 2000 - 2009

In the year 2000, the overall living standards of the Chinese people reached a moderately prosperous level, marking the country's entry into comprehensive construction of a moderately prosperous society. The changes in Engel's coefficient generally indicate the changing trend of the proportion of necessities in people's overall consumption. In 2000, the Engel's coefficient for urban residents in China dropped to 40%, while it was around 50% for rural residents[16]. In 2006, urban residents had an average annual per capita consumption expenditure of 8696.6 yuan, whereas rural residents had an average annual per capita consumption expenditure of 4485.4 yuan. In 2000, only 9.7 households out of every hundred in urban areas owned a personal computer, a number that increased to 47.2 by 2006. Since 2005, the number of internet users and internet penetration rates in China have been rapidly increasing. In 2005, there were 111 million internet users. By the end of June 2009, the number of internet users in China reached 338 million. Internet penetration rates steadily improved, making the internet an important medium in people's lives [17]. With the development of television and online media, Western media culture has been widely disseminated in China, profoundly influencing consumers' attitudes and values. Western media products are highly popular in the Chinese market, indicating that the media consumption of the Chinese people has become more open and diversified [18].

(4) 2010 - 2020

In December 2012, Xi Jinping assumed the role of the Chairman of the National Military Commission in China. He introduced the dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, aiming for national security, prosperity, a strong military, and the happiness of the people. In 2014, there was a strong emphasis on efforts to transform the country into a cyber superpower. The comprehensive promotion of the rule of law and the establishment of a socialist legal system in the country were highlighted. In 2017, the Belt and Road Forum was held in Beijing, marking a significant milestone in China's international engagement. In June 2019, China entered the 5G era with advancements in telecommunications technology [19]. In 2021, the average disposable income per capita in China was 35,128 yuan for the whole year. Urban residents had an average disposable income of 47,412 yuan, while rural residents had an average disposable income of 18,931 yuan [20]. There has been a significant increase in income levels. With the rise in the general public's income, changes in the living environment have given rise to new cultural trends. People not only have demands for Western everyday products but also have a strong enthusiasm for the ostentatious culture of luxury goods. The development of the internet allows people to access novel information from around the world and embrace diverse cultural perspectives. Consumption is no longer solely about fulfilling basic needs for food and clothing; it now satisfies individuals' spiritual desires. People consume for a virtual concept or a particular style. Consumption in the online world fulfills their

psychological needs. In China's 5G era, the internet has become an indispensable part of people's lives. Electronic magazines have replaced printed ones, and various mobile news apps have replaced traditional newspapers. Advertisements played on various smart screens have replaced traditional posters. The internet has thoroughly become the mainstream medium of this era.

4.2. Advertising Performance in Different Media

(1) Newspaper Advertising

In 1988, Coca-Cola Company published an advertisement in newspapers with the theme of "Watching Olympic Volleyball and Enjoying Coca-Cola." The ad was integrated with the Chinese women's volleyball team, leveraging the influence of the Olympic Games to promote their brand. The slogan was "Remember the Olympic volleyball match, guess where the ball goes, please enjoy Coca-Cola." In terms of media characteristics, newspaper advertising has a high reach, moderate selectivity, low interactivity, and moderate content information. The production cost was high during the 20th century. In terms of the form of advertising performance, it utilized explanatory, sensory, and everyday experiential expressions. Explanatory performance is evident in the content, explaining the relationship between Coca-Cola and the match. Sensory performance is displayed through visual images in the advertisement. Everyday experiential performance is showcased through the audience's Olympic viewing experience, enhancing Coca-Cola's brand favorability among the audience.

(2) Direct Mail (DM) Advertisement

In 1990, Coca-Cola collaborated with the Beijing Asian Games to create a DM advertisement with the theme of an unstoppable feeling. The slogan was "An unstoppable feeling, drink Coca-Cola." Considering the media characteristics, DM advertising had very low reach, extremely high selectivity, low interactivity, and moderate content information. During the era when DM advertising was mainstream, production costs were high. In terms of the form of advertising performance, it employed sensory, everyday experiential, and symbolic expressions. Similar to newspaper media, sensory performance in the DM advertisement was conveyed through visual expressions. Everyday experiential performance was evident in leveraging the audience's interest in the Asian Games to enhance brand awareness. Symbolic performance was represented through the liquid of Coca-Cola in the advertisement, symbolizing a refreshing pool, utilizing metaphorical expressions.

(3) Magazine Advertisement

In 2003, the musical duo Twins' concert collaborated with Coca-Cola to create a magazine advertisement with the theme "Coca-Cola's Colorful World." The slogan was "Singing joyfully in the summer, this is Coca-Cola's colorful world." Considering the characteristics of magazine advertising, it had moderate reach and selectivity, relatively low interactivity, average information content, and relatively high production costs. In terms of the form of advertising performance, it utilized sensory and emotional expressions. Sensory expression was evident in the visual presentation of the advertisement. Emotional expression was showcased through the fans' love for the celebrities, creating a halo effect for the collaborating brand.

(4) Television Advertisement

In October 1986, Queen Elizabeth II of England made her first visit to China. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produced a documentary about her visit. China Central Television (CCTV) sought to purchase the broadcasting rights and approached Coca-Cola, hoping for a \$200,000 sponsorship to air Coca-Cola commercials before and after the documentary, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. *The Coca-Cola TV Advertisement in 1986.*

Although \$200,000 was a significant sum at the time, it presented an excellent opportunity for Coca-Cola, a company that had faced controversies during its years of operation in China. This marked the first Coca-Cola advertisement aired on CCTV after China's reform and opening-up policy. Through this, Coca-Cola gradually became familiar to the public and integrated into the lives of millions of ordinary people in China. The ad copy read, "In the morning, you and I, how much anticipation we have; Greetings in each other's eyes, radiating friendship; Showing kindness and care, treating each other with sincerity; Shining in my heart, keeping warmth always present; At this moment, I have my Coca-Cola, an unstoppable feeling; At this moment, I have my Coca-Cola; An unstoppable, unstoppable feeling." Considering the characteristics of television advertising, it had very high reach, very low selectivity, and very low interactivity, with relatively low content information and production costs not exceptionally high during the 20th century. Regarding the form of advertising performance, it employed sensory, emotional, and everyday experiential expressions. Sensory expression was evident in the combination of visual and auditory elements in the video presentation. Emotional expression was demonstrated through scenes in the advertisement, such as friends going on a spring outing together, fathers playing with their children, and colleagues leaving work together, connecting Coca-Cola with various human emotions. It conveyed a warm and happy feeling, while also suggesting that owning the product leads to happiness. Everyday experiential expression was depicted through nine different daily life scenarios in the advertisement, such as students doing radio exercises on campus, factory workers, and sisters getting their hair styled at a hair salon. The advertisement portrayed the product's essential role in real-life situations, emphasizing its indispensability in people's lives.

(1) Online Advertisement

In 2014, Coca-Cola produced a video advertisement with the theme "Coca-Cola Winter Limited Edition." This ad had no dialogues or slogans throughout; it only displayed the Coca-Cola logo at the end of the video, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. *Coca-Cola Online video advertisement in 2014.*

Considering the characteristics of online advertising, it had very high reach and relatively high selectivity. Due to the interactivity of the internet, it had a comparatively high level of feedback and contained a substantial amount of information. The production costs were relatively low. In terms of the form of advertising performance, the ad employed sensory, emotional, everyday experiential, and symbolic expressions. Sensory expression: The ad conveyed its message through a combination of visual and auditory elements in the video. Emotional expression: It capitalized on the social issue of environmental protection to enhance the brand's image in the viewers' minds. Everyday experiential expression: Scenes featuring a polar bear family playing together in the advertisement would evoke associations with viewers' own families. Symbolic expression: The use of polar bears as symbols for humanity appealed for the protection of the polar bears' habitat.

In summary, advertisements exhibit different forms across various media platforms. Analyzing Coca-Cola's advertising cases, the following conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, newspaper advertisements appeared early, primarily focusing on explanatory information and visuals. Secondly, DM advertisements share similarities with newspaper ads but incorporate symbolic graphics alongside explanatory information. Thirdly, magazine ads mainly emphasize visual and emotional expressions. Fourthly, early television ads primarily depicted real-life experiences, creating a sense of familiarity for viewers through a combination of visual and auditory elements. Fifthly, online ads utilize diverse forms, often combining emotions and everyday experiences. They can convey more information to the audience and establish better interactive communication.

5. Conclusions

This study conducted a survey on the changes in media and a theoretical investigation into advertising forms in China since the reform and opening-up policy, with a focus on Coca-Cola brand advertisements. The analysis leads to the following conclusions. Firstly, social development significantly influences culture, and promotional media, as tools for information dissemination, also contribute to cultural changes. Different periods have their own mainstream promotional media. Secondly, due to the characteristics of promotional media, the conveyed advertising information exhibits differences in its forms of expression. Thirdly, the evolution of promotional media requires advertisements to incorporate more emotional and symbolic elements. This integration is essential to prevent consumers from developing resistance towards advertisements. Therefore, future forms of advertising are closely intertwined with human emotions.

Conflicts of Interest

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