

Exploring Burberry's Consumer Boycott: A Cross Cultural Comparison of the UK and China

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Abstract: *While many global luxury goods have entered the Chinese market and Chinese consumers' consumption levels are on the rise, major brands have been exposed for insulting, discriminating, and treating Chinese consumers differently. Burberry's long history of sales and promotion in the Chinese market has been marked by considerable prejudice and misunderstanding of Chinese culture, to the extent that there have been many incidents of culture conflict, leading to Burberry being questioned and resisted.*

Keywords: *Cross-cultural Marketing, Consumer Boycott, Cultural Conflict*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Burberry is a British luxury brand that was founded in 1856 by Thomas Burberry. Sophisticated and practical weatherproof cotton is at the heart of Burberry's expertise. The brand became famous for providing a range of military uniforms and accessories for the British Army during the First and Second World Wars. In 1960 Burberry's fashion shows in London, Paris and elsewhere gradually launched Burberry's blueprint for global luxury and cemented the brand's position as an iconic global luxury brand, bringing its collections into the homes of millions of consumers worldwide ^[1]. Burberry's products are primarily based on ready-to-wear, accessories and beauty. As of this year, Burberry operates 418 shops worldwide in Asia pacific, EMEA, and the Americas ^[2].

1.2 Justification of the study

There is a lack of research on the cross-cultural issues arising from Burberry's presence in Chinese culture, with a large body of research literature focusing on case studies of the experiential marketing and impact effects of luxury brands, as well as studies analysing the operational issues of luxury brands. Cross-cultural issues are a critical path for every brand that wants to enter the international market. This report is divided into two main sections, and the first section is based on an analysis of what appropriate and inappropriate marketing activities were implemented in Burberry's product and promotion of marketing in China and the UK from a cultural perspective by exploring cultural factors such as traditions, beliefs and values to assess the root causes of marketing failures; the second section aims to explore the relationship between Burberry's product and promotion, consumers and brand identity in China and UK, and to make recommendations and solutions based on the issues in both section.

2. Culture

Global brands tend to incorporate local cultural elements into their marketing activities. In response, many luxury brands have adopted strategies to create relevance for their brands to local consumers by incorporating cultural aspects such as the values, practices, images, and symbols of the local culture into localised marketing to increase the acceptance of their brands by local consumers ^[3]. While some examples of localised marketing have been well received by local consumers, such as Burberry's foray into China's e-commerce platforms and China's social media platforms; and the collaboration of Chinese celebrities as ambassadors, there are still examples of misguided marketing by Burberry in China that have caused significant boycott.

2.1 Promotion of Marketing

In January 2019, to celebrate Chinese New Year, Burberry collaborated with celebrities Zhao Wei and Zhou Dongyu to create a family portrait advertisement (*Figure 1*) called "Modern New Year", which was posted under the Weibo hashtag #BurberryChineseNewYear. Still, its release sparked a wave of ridicule from Chinese netizens, who commented. "Burberry's marketing theme was intended to reflect love and the marketing concept of 'family consumption', providing a warm family reunion atmosphere. But in the advertisement, all the characters are fierce look, and expressions and movements determine the overall atmosphere of the advertisement. From the perspective of expressions and movements, the characters look severe and preoccupied, not even relaxed and festive smiles; the characters' movements are very stiff and reluctant, and the overall atmosphere reveals a sense of loneliness, rustiness as if each person is an independent existence; standing can reflect the relationship between the characters, the relationship between the characters standing in the advertisement is very unclear, blurred placement will make the relationship between the characters in the advertisement look very confusing. Compare this to Burberry's Christmas advertisement in the UK (*Figure 2*); the elements of candles, chandeliers and courtly backgrounds in the advertisement show a noble and elegant atmosphere. The advertisement shows the characters dressed up, with smiles on their faces and elegant body movements, balancing high class and joy, creating a solid and luxurious Christmas atmosphere. What are the underlying reasons for the failure of these cross-cultural marketing activities in China?



<https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/mistakes-marketing-to-chinese-consumers/>

Figure 1: Burberry's New Year campaign(2019), by Rachel Lou.



Figure 2: Burberry's Christmas advertisement, by Burberry.

2.1.1 Customs and Traditions lead to differentiation

In the Chinese tradition, harmony and a sense of belonging are important, and family and team are essential. According to Hofstede's review, developed Western countries have an individualistic spirit, whereas China is a collectivised society with a highly collectivist culture, where the collectivist 'we' identity carries more weight than the individualistic 'I' identity. People behaviour for the benefit of the collective, not necessarily for themselves ^[4]. And many luxury brands impose a Western perspective on

the East, making it impossible for Western decisions, which are characterised by an individualistic spirit, to fit into a collectivist China. The Chinese cultural tradition emphasises paternalism, hierarchical obedience, harmony, and group supremacy^[5], and the traditional concept of inferiority and superiority still exists deep in the Chinese psyche, influencing people's behaviour and words, where the centre is respected. The front row is honoured, with the elders sitting in the middle in front, the parents accompanying the elderly on either side, and the teenagers standing on either side of the parents. The advertisement does not reflect the spirit of collectivism or harmony, nor does it show the atmosphere of Chinese New Year, nor does it reflect the concept of seniority rules, which has been met with dissatisfaction by Chinese netizens.

2.2 Product of Marketing

Luxury brands have launched limited-edition Chinese New Year items every year to appeal to Chinese consumers, but the style has been uniformly 'ugly', since the launch of Burberry's print with the Chinese character Fu (福) (Figure 3) 2019. Until the 2021 Chinese New Year collection, Burberry drew inspiration from the upcoming Chinese Zodiac year (represented by bulls and cows); not only did the advertisement use a live bull, but also the use of bull prints and black and white and red elements on ready-to-wear, handbags, shoes and accessories (Figure 4) sparked trolling from consumers and was laughed at by the general public as the favourite Spring Festival cloth bags of grandparents, with many consumers teasing the bags for looking like cheap polypropylene woven fabric.



Source: <https://www.campaignasia.com/article/burberry-finds-chinese-speaking-markets-hard-to-please/394601>

Figure 3: Burberry scarf for Chinese New Year (2015), by Campaign Asia-Pacific.



Figure 4: 2021 Chinese New Year collection, by Burberry

2.2.1 Stereotypes lead to differentiation

The root cause of the failure of the marketing strategy due to the product issue is the lack of stereotypes and cultural integration initiatives. The Chinese New Year is one of the most important traditional festivals and gift-giving festivals in China. For decades, international luxury brands have been trying to utilise their cultural elements and symbols in the hope of resonating with local consumers. However, with its use of animal characters in product design and its habit of using prominent red colours and the distinctive Chinese character Fu (福), Burberry may have borrowed cultural elements from

Chinese traditions, but it has little or no ability to truly understand and appreciate Chinese aesthetics, or even the so-called stereotypes of the Chinese and even Asians. So-called stereotypes. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines a stereotype as a commonly held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. Stereotypes are fundamentally incorrect and derogatory generalisations about group characteristics that reflect the underlying prejudices or other internal motivations of the stereotypes^[6]. Nowadays, Chinese culture is evolving rapidly, reflecting the diversity and great inclusiveness, but many luxury brands still like to show the disadvantages of traditional Chinese culture, while stereotypes hinder the acceptance of new things by individuals or society, affecting the actual value of things and the transmission of emotions, which never ceases to divide East and West, influencing the development of brands and consumers' perception of the brand.

3. Consumer (and Brand) Identity and Personality

3.1 The relation between Self-concept and Marketing

Self-concept is an image shaped by the very person holding the image. A basic definition of this term is: "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object". The self-concept is not real but rather represents the individual's subjective idea of themselves^[7]. According to self-consistency theory, consumers prefer brands that match their personal value preferences and self-identify^[8]. Extending these findings to advertising in marketing, it can be found that there is a strong tendency for people to have more favourable attitudes towards a product depicted in an advertisement if it resembles the target audience's perception of themselves in terms of image or characteristics, and advertising claims that match the audience's self-concept^[7]. However, consumers express not only their consistent identity in different situations but also their ideal self-concept, and in most cases the ideal self-concept is a point of reference in comparison to the real self-concept. If there is a difference between the self-concept, the individual strives to achieve the ideal state. Therefore, the ideal self-concept drives the personal motivation for upward mobility^[9].

The Power Distance Index (PDI) was developed by Geert Hofstede and is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of a country's institutions and organisations expect and accept an unequal distribution of power^[10]. Burberry as a luxury brand creates a sense of identification or appeals to consumers' ideal self-concept in order to influence their preference for the brand, for example through using marketing activities such as advertising and high-quality products to stimulate high and low PDI to increase preference for the brand^[11]. The luxury brand is particularly affected in countries with a high PDI, where consumers perceive luxury as equivalent to high social status, while consumers in countries with a low PDI do not need to buy their social status with luxury goods because of the small gap between classes. China, at 80, ranks high in the PDI, with a polarisation of hierarchical relations. In contrast, the UK, at 35, ranks low in the PDI, in a society that believes inequality between people should be minimised^[12].

In the UK, Burberry has released an advertisement in which a man walks and reads a book, immersed in his world undisturbed by the sounds of the outside world. Each character in the advertisement comes with exquisite make-up and expensive accessories and wears a classic Burberry trench coat, depicting a noble gentleman with rich cultural connotations and social status. For the West, with its individualistic spirit, this kind of atmosphere triggers a higher sense of self-identification, promoting consumer preference for the brand. In China, Burberry's headlines on Weibo and WeChat are based on words such as dazzling crystal, classic check, luxury, and glitter. In China, where power distance is high, the direct presentation of the product's glamorous and expensive features through advertising is tantamount to conveying the impression of high social status to consumers, thus increasing Chinese consumers' preference for the brand.

3.2 The relation between Personality and Marketing

Personality is the collection of personal characteristics that make a person unique and consists of many factors (i.e. attitudes, perceptions, motivations, etc.)^[13]. Luxury goods often function as status markers, but consumers' propensity and intrinsic motivation to purchase luxury goods vary^[14]. The literature suggests that people's motivational atmosphere for luxury consumption is internal and external; for externalisation, some customers may purchase luxury goods primarily to show their status and prestige; for internalisation, other customers purchase luxury goods to satisfy their personal taste and style, while externally motivated luxury consumption may lead to more public consumption of consumer

goods and conspicuous consumption. ^[15]. Consumers with an externalised luxury approach can be represented by the notion of conspicuous consumption more than those who predominantly adopt an internalised luxury approach, which aims to convey a unique self-image to others ^[16].

Brand personality can be linked through product style, brand symbols or logos, and advertising style ^[17]. Burberry, under the leadership of its newly appointed chief creative officer Tisci, introduced avant-garde design and street style to embrace a more unisex, youthful identity. In 2020, Burberry replaced the complex traditional warhorse logo with a simple, premium TB. Despite interest in Riccardo Tisci's designs, Burberry's turnaround isn't going to be easy ^[18]. However, Burberry's operating profit growth rate is only 4.22% in 2022 (*Figure 5*). Burberry has suffered multiple embarrassments in recent years due to the ease with which one finds pieces featuring his interlocking "TB" print at steep discounts online ^[19]. One of the reasons for this is that the loss of the original value of the product because the price was reduced too quickly, the failure to meet the externalised consumer's objective of showing their status and prestige, the low recognition of the product's new logo and the inability of the product's style to meet the internalised consumer's unique personal taste and style.

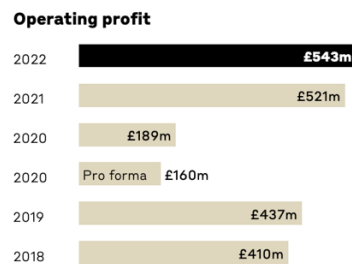


Figure 5: Burberry Annual Report 21/22 (Growth rate = $(£543-£521)/521=4.22\%$)

4. Recommendations

4.1 Product Innovation and Localisation

When implementing cross-cultural marketing, the first step should be to respect the cultural differences between the two countries. Brands should have an in-depth understanding of the origins, characteristics, personalities, and values of the Chinese cultural traditions that are explored. Product appearance and quality should be presented at a high level, focusing on product innovation and identity, creating product stories in the Chinese market, emphasising the brand's uniqueness, personalising it and showing others how they can personalise it. Elaborate on how to draw features from Chinese culture to produce products that make more use of the local, such as traditional Chinese tie-dye techniques.

4.2 Promotion of Traditional Chinese festival

For international advertising to spread and thrive in the Chinese market, some elements of traditional Chinese festivals, such as the auspiciousness, festivity and reunion of the Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, should be incorporated into the creative. For example, traditional Chinese folk customs such as paper-cutting, firecrackers and New Year posters should be included in the creation of advertisements.

4.3 Using Empathy

Value other countries' cultures, respect their cultural characteristics, tap into cultural commonalities based on a deeper understanding of their cultural cores, and choose the parts common to both cultures to design and expand in line with local cultural concepts and values. It allows Chinese consumers to empathise and resonate. For example, by blending the advertisements with humanistic sentiments such as "kinship, nostalgia and harmony between man and nature", audiences from different cultural backgrounds can also view the advertisements and be moved by them, causing solid emotional resonance.

4.4 Cultivate the Chinese Team

Brands need to pay more attention to the training of Chinese teams. For brands to market themselves

in conjunction with the local culture, they need to have a complete and in-depth understanding of the target country's culture and systems, create highly localised advertising and brand copy, and bring in Chinese talent or teams in order to better leverage the effectiveness of their expertise.

4.5 Controlling the Development of Public Opinion

In order to reduce the impact caused by negative public opinion after a conflict, luxury brands should communicate and respond positively and effectively on social media platforms correctly and in a timely manner, paying attention to consumers' demands and not engaging in word games on social media. In addition, luxury brands need to invest more and pay more attention to the day-to-day operation and management of social media and do their daily PR activities well to avoid crisis events where brands are marketing in different cultural countries.

5. Conclusion

China is becoming a strategic focus for many luxury brands. Therefore, in the marketing of brands, it is necessary to get rid of the stereotypical mindset, fully understand and pay attention to the cultural differences between different countries, and carefully study the way of thinking, value orientation, psychological characteristics, customs and religious regulations of people and nationalities in different cultural backgrounds, and reasonably integrate to win the recognition and affirmation of consumers. In summary, through the case of Burberry's failure in marketing and product strategies, the underlying reasons behind the failure were found to be the differences in values, customs and stereotypes between different cultures; through the analysis of the relationship between self-concept and personality and marketing activities, it was found that brand personality and consumer self-identity are inextricably linked, and recommendations and solutions were developed to better address the problems that Burberry is facing at this stage.

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