

# Research on the Construction of Consumer Identity under the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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**ABSTRACT.** *In intercultural communication, the identification of cultural identity is a process of constantly updating and transforming one's cultural identity, which is well exemplified in international advertisements. Lifestyles, values and personal characters conveyed by international advertisements can unconsciously construct or reconstruct the cultural identity of target audiences, which would motivate their purchasing to a great extent. Under the guidance of cultural identity theory, this thesis theorize and discusses how consumer identity is communicated, constructed, and consumed in the cross-cultural advertising through explicit and implicit processes. Findings of the research reveal that consumer identity construction is not a static and fixed process but a dynamic process in which different identities have been constructed in the selected cross-cultural advertisements. In addition, the present research finds that the constructed identity serves as a persuasive means to induce audiences to make symbolic consumption.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Cross-cultural Advertising, International Advertisement, Social Identity, Consumer Identity*

## 1. Introduction

With the development of economy and improvement of people's living standard, car has become a necessity in modern society. For most of the people, car means a lot, like social status, identity, power, wealth and lifestyle rather than a means of travel. The reason why more and more people are desperate for buying a car is that they pay attention to the symbolic value of cars. Besides, car advertising can illustrate a lot for the construction of consumer identity. Owing to this, the present study chooses car advertising as the research object. As an important information spreading approach and marketing means, advertising plays an extraordinary role in modern society. In the past few years, advertising has become a popular subject of study, which has approached different fields, such as media, marketing, psychology, and aesthetics. Previous studies mainly focus on identity and advertising, however, few researches have combined the two aspects. To fill the gap, this thesis intends to analyze how consumer identity is constructed in the international advertising through the case analysis. In the present research, the author conducts a qualitative

study based on the literature review of cultural identity, and social identity and intends to explore the following questions.

1) What kind of consumer's identity is constructed in the process of cross-cultural advertising?

2) What are the functions of the constructed consumer identity?

## **2. Theoretical Background**

Turner (1987) defines identity as "Who am I", which involves classification and identification of the "I" concept. According to George Meade (2015), identity is the interactive process between subjective selection and social relation, in which one can realize and construct his identity only when he integrates into the group and interacts with others. In the field of marketing and consumer behavior, researchers have realized that cultural identity can stimulate marketing and they've paid attention to this theme. Some researchers have made great achievements to shed light on the relationship between culture, language, and identity, illustrating how consumer identity is constructed through culture and language in the advertising. For example, Jonathan & Detle (2004) theorize how masculine identity interacts with consumption—of imagery, products, desires, and passions in advertising and consumer culture. Sun Hui (2009) notes that there are gender identity, ethnic identity, class identity, age identity in context of advertising, which induces consumers to make symbolic consumption. Gong (2015) explores how consumer identity construction contributes to persuasion in advertising through the employment of linguistic adaption theory. The research on consumer identity showcases interdisciplinary perspectives that discuss and theorize how identity is communicated, constructed, and consumed in contemporary and historical consumer culture (Jonathan E. Schroeder, 2015). Nguyen & Doan & Nicole (2015) examines identity-based brand judgments by exploring consumers' preferences for the media environment and their ensuing perceptions of social identity congruence (consumer's key salient social identity dimensions: gender and ethnicity) between themselves and media characters. In addition, Eleni, Rosalia & Gerard (2016) sheds light on the underlying social psychological processes of ethical consumer behavior from a Social Identity Approach and findings reveal how consumers negotiate their perceptions of ethics and respective behaviors through the construction and identification of in-groups and out-groups and communicate their shared social identity through different consumption practices. Previous studies on advertising have demonstrated many aspects of consumer identity, such linguistic, sociocultural perspective and lay a solid foundation for the present study.

Researchers both at home and abroad have conducted a lot of researches on advertising and identity construction in different contexts and from different perspectives. Previous studies have shown that great achievements have been made in this field. However, there are still some limitations. The research on cultural identity lacks of systemic and comprehensive exploration. Besides, taking cultural identity as an already established premise, reflection of the theme is not in-depth and

profound. Scholars both at home and abroad have done lots of work in the nature and characteristics of the identity construction, while few studies have explored its functions in the context of advertising. Accordingly, this thesis intends to investigate identity in cross-cultural advertising and explore how consumer identity is constructed and communicated in the process.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### ***3.1 Overview of Car Advertising and Cross-cultural Advertising***

The advertiser of an automobile advertisement is an automobile manufacturer or automobile dealer. The advertisement pays a certain fee to the media such as radio, television, newspapers, and outdoor big names through economic or other paid methods. The activities are spread or promoted in different media through the media. The purpose of automobile advertising is to establish a good corporate image. Through the display of automobile advertisements, we strive to increase consumer awareness, brand awareness, and ultimately purchase such products. In car TV advertising, both advertisers and advertising audiences will be the benefit groups. For consumers, car advertising is an important means to convey information of the car and then stimulate consumers' desire to purchase. Besides, consumers can have more options when they want to buy a car. For companies, advertising can convey brand culture and manifest the features of the products, underlying lifestyles, and concept which will be useful for them to improve the consumer awareness, market awareness, and company image, thus they will get more profits.

Cross-cultural advertising is a part of the advertisement which involves the cross culture communication between different counties. There are 3 main features of cross-cultural advertising: being complex; one-to-one communication; changing constantly (Wei, 2016). With the advancement of economic globalization, cross-cultural advertising has played a more and more important role in the publicity of international products. No matter what product it is, successful entry into its target country requires a clear understanding of local culture and consumers. Besides, consumers' recognition of advertising depends on the correlation between advertising and their own culture. Generally, the closer the correlation is, the more possible target consumers have a positive attitude to the advertising, thus to purchase the product. The present research chooses two cross-cultural advertisements of Mercedes-Benz in order to analyze how does Mercedes-Benz respect cultural differences and construct consumer identity under the guidance of cultural identity theory.

#### ***3.2 Consumer Identity Construction in the Two Cross-cultural Advertising***

Identity refers to the degree of one's recognition and acceptance to a certain group which he belongs to. The realization of identity needs to answer the following questions: How one's identity is constructed? Where does one's identity come from?

And for who is identity constructed (Huang Ling, 2007)? Identity may be abstract and intangible but it doesn't mean nothing. However, identity can be revealed by one's lifestyle especially consumption. Advertising utilizes persuasive language or symbol such as dialogues, advertising slogans, and brand names to create a specific context in which consumers can find their identity, then they are persuaded to consume as they are told in the advertising. Therefore, advertisers endeavor to induce consumption by choosing contents related to consumer identity and creating symbolic meaning of products.

In general, any individual possesses and shares several different identities at the same time. One could be a member of the family, such as mother, father, husband, wife, son, and daughter which can be seen as the role identity; one can be man or woman (gender identity). Besides, one could also have other identities, such as ethnic identity, national identity, social identity, professional identity, church identity, generation identity, sport identity, etc. The selected two ads mainly reveal two kinds of identity, one is role identity and another is social identity.

### ***3.2.1 Construction of Consumer's Role Identity***

Ashforth (2005) believes that one's role identity provides a self-concept in the role, including the recognition of the goals, values, beliefs, norms, space-time, and modes of interaction between roles. Usually two research modes are employed in the role identity: one emphasizes an individual's subjectivity and initiative to make amendments or changes to the social regulations, another is to put one's role into the context of social structure, focusing on constraints and externalities (Chen Yingfang, 2007). Generally speaking, any individual behavior is reflected in the process of constructing identity, and identity always runs through role identity. When an individual faces multiple identities, he will take many factors into consideration, such as his existing condition, capability, his developing need, and personal wish, etc. on such basis, he makes choices. Only by doing like this, one can have a clear understanding of his own identity. In the selected samples, both of two advertisements illustrate the role identity of the young man and young lady, respectively acting as the father (husband), the mother (wife). The constructed role identity is characterized by being family-oriented, having a strong sense of responsibility, pursuing dreams bravely, etc. After consumers receive and decode the message in the ad, they will clearly understand their role identity and what kind responsibility and obligations they bear.

### ***3.2.2 Construction of Consumer's Social Identity***

#### ***3.2.2.1 Identity of Successful People***

In modern society, numerous people who are hard-working have made great achievements in their career, now they are mainstays of the society. Material wealth is not their pursuit any more, thus they begin to seek their psychological positions.

As a consumer product, car that few people can own is undoubtedly seen as a symbol of one's social identity, which is a good illustration of a social phenomenon that car serves to show social status, taste, life attitude by many successful people. Therefore, mid-to-high end advertising will be tailored to consumers' needs. The selected advertisement shows the successful image of successful people. Ad 2 chooses Li Na who is a famous tennis player as the leading actor, she has a private driver, and she sits in the car, looks at the documents, and talks about business. Besides, she seems quite confident on the tennis court and talkative on the stage. In a word, the selected ad implies the extraordinary social status and career success of consumers through the setting of the leading actor.

### ***3.2.2.2 Identity of the Fighting Generation of Youth***

Except the high-end brand car, Mercedes-Benz also has low and middle end brand targeting at young generation who are fighting for their career, who are also called Fen Qing. Compared with successful people, they care for more about taste, attitude, personality reflected by the car rather than the social status. They are still in the rising period of their career, they want to prove themselves and are desperate for social recognition. Therefore, if the fighting generation is targeted at, car advertising should take features of such group into consideration. In the ad 1 of Mercedes-Benz, the leading actor has a family of three, he works hard and struggles for their career and dreams. From the sample, we can see that this ad takes "family" and "dream" as the selling point and meets the consumer's definition of their identity.

## ***3.3 Functions of Identity Construction in the Selected Advertising***

### ***3.3.1 Creating Symbolic Meanings and Values of Products***

As we all know that advertising serves to convey information of products. With the fierce competition in the market, car advertising is an important means to create symbolic value, such as status, identity, taste, and personality for the sake of stimulating people's desire for consumption. Therefore, people consume not only for the practical value but also for the symbolic value. According to Baudrillard, a French sociologist, the practical use of products makes no big difference, while numerous products and consuming behaviors have become a symbol. In other words, what you buy affects who you are, thus you buy something because of the symbols.

### ***3.3.2 Inducing Consumers to Make Symbolic Consumption***

In today's world, consumption not only has the use value reflected in the material form, but also is the main resources for consumers' self-expression and identity. According to the investigation, we can see that car advertising reflects the differences of consumers' identities such as gender, age, and social status, consumers can find their self-image under the guidance of advertisement. It can be

seen that the selected advertisements utilize narrative strategies to create added values and symbolic meanings which are combined with the consumer identity, then consumers are guided to finish the process of symbolic consumption. Regardless of practical value or symbolic value, the car advertisement serves as a communicative means to make consumers decode the hidden meaning and be aware of the importance of the products. Through the advertising, consumer would have the idea that their identity, social status, taste, and attitude are closely related to the products they buy.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The present study explores consumer identity construction in the cross-cultural advertising of Mercedes-Benz, and all the research questions mentioned above have been addressed and major findings are presented as follows. First, consumer identity construction in the advertising of Mercedes-Benz is a dynamic process of making choices rather than a fixed process. The research has revealed that different identities have been constructed in the selected advertising, such as role identity and social identity. Second, functions of different identities have been illustrated by the case study. It has been found that the selected car advertising constructs consumer identity by creating symbol values and then persuades consumers to make symbolic consumption. Through the analysis, findings reveal that advertisers of Mercedes-Benz successfully find the common ground between their culture and Chinese culture, try to link the products positioning and segmentation with consumer identity, thus they can flexibly adjust their advertising strategies in terms of the cultural differences and local consumer identity construction. This approach has greatly reduced the antipathy and perplexity that Chinese people have when they facing foreign products with culture differences. From what have mentioned above, we can conclude that a successful cross-cultural advertisement requires understanding and sincere respect to the cultural differences of the target country, thus it would be easier for consumers to recognize and accept foreign products. However, this study is not without limitations. The present study mainly focuses on consumer identity from the researcher's view, which can't reflect whether these constructed consumer identity contributes to consumers' consumption. Field interview or questionnaires can be conducted to investigate consumers' responses to the cross-cultural advertising. Besides, further studies may be conducted in depth with different cross-cultural advertisements for similar products or services. Besides, narrative model, visual culture, cross culture communication, and gender study in cross-cultural advertising are worth to be approached.

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