

# A Brief Analysis of Cultural Differences between China and America through the McDonald's Advertisements

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**ABSTRACT.** *It is well-known that McDonald's advertisements have acted as a melt-pot for the world culture. Base on this background, The cultural differences between China and America will be analyzed through McDonald's advertisements, taking collectivism and individualism, long-term orientation and short-term orientation in Hofstede's cultural dimension theory as well as the high-context and low-context proposed by Hall as the theoretical framework, and McDonald's advertising as the realistic resource. Finally, the inspiration of cultural difference between China and America through the McDonald's advertisements and conclusion will be given accordingly.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Cultural differences, Sino-us, Advertisement, Mcdonald*

## 1. Introduction

Advertising, as a commercial means, plays an increasingly irreplaceable role in brand management. Especially with today's rapid development of economic globalization, advertising has become one of the most important parts of the marketing strategy of multinational brands. Through the study of tailor-made advertisements for different audiences in different cultural backgrounds, people can often more objectively and clearly understand the cultural differences hidden under different advertisements. It is well-known that McDonald's advertisements influenced by different cultures have acted as a melt-pot of the world culture. Thus, the cultural differences between China and America will be discussible though McDonald's advertisements.

## 2. Advertising and Culture

### 2.1 The Definition of Advertising

Conceptually, the English word "advertising" originates from the Latin word "adventure" which means to arouse attention of the public for something (Leech 5). There are numerous definitions and classifications of advertising. At present, Debra's definition of advertising is generally accepted. Debra defines advertising as highly distilled information delivered through mass media to the general public in an artistic form, whose aim is to strengthen or alter people's opinion and eventually influence human behaviors and activities (941-957). Generally speaking, advertising is a comprehensive art which integrates psychology, sociology, marketing, aesthetics, linguistics and the use of acoustic and photoelectric equipment. Advertising uses marketing principles and combines various fields of knowledge to produce text and pictures that can draw the attention of the audience and stimulate their consumption behavior.

Among kinds of advertisements, language and picture are often the main factors that draw the attention of the audience, but behind this phenomenon is the subtle influence of different cultural factors on consumers' purchase behavior. Cheng once pointed out that advertising is regarded as a cultural product reflecting social conditions and a carrier of cultural values (qtd. in Ma 131). Commercial advertisements often impress consumers with culture, and advertising activities usually occur in specific cultures. Therefore, with the rapid development of economic globalization, various cultures contained in advertisements have gradually attracted people's attention.

### 2.2 The Definition of Culture

Meanwhile, the concept of culture is very extensive, and the definition of the concept of culture has always been a controversial topic for scholars at home and abroad. Scholars from all walks of life have defined “culture” from their respective disciplinary perspectives. Smol, from a psychological point of view, defines “culture” as the sum of technical, mechanical, intellectual and mental abilities that people use to achieve their goals at a particular time (qtd. in Shi, “What is Culture”). From the perspective of anthropology and sociology, American sociologist David Popenoe defined “culture” as a result of human groups or social sharing. These common products include not only values, language, knowledge, but also material objects (2-10). From the perspective of intercultural communication, “the culture of every society is unique, containing combinations of norms and values that are found nowhere else” (qtd. in Xu, and Wu 40). According to these definitions, advertising, as a technology used by people in a particular period in order to achieve their goals, should also fall within the scope of cultural studies. Therefore, many advertising works are also a manifestation of culture.

### ***2.3 The Relationship of Advertising and Culture***

Actually, the relationship between advertising and culture is just like the relationship between reflection and object itself. Advertising originates from the cultural environment in which its audience lives and reflects the culture of the environment in which its audience groups live. Culture is ubiquitous, and influences advertisements and people in it all the time. Edward Hall once pointed out that no matter how hard a person works, it is impossible to get rid of his own culture, because it has penetrated into the root of his nervous system and determines how he can observe the world. People can't act in any meaningful way except through cultural media (177). As for advertising, culture still has the same effect on it. On the other hand, advertising is a reflection of culture. Different nationalities have different histories, traditions, customs, politics, economy, beliefs and religions, as well as differences in personality, which will lead to different advertisements (Hofstede 2).

## **3. Cultural Dimension Theory and McDonald's Advertisements**

### ***3.1 Cultural Dimension Theory***

Cultural dimension is a theory put forward by Hofstede, director of the Institute of international cultural cooperation, when he conducted the quantitative study of cultural factors (Li Jie 110). The theory is mostly used to measure and compare cultural differences between different countries, including five basic cultural dimensions: collectivism and individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and femininity, long-term orientation and short-term orientation. According to the characteristics of the whole paper, the collectivism and individualism, long-term orientation and short-term orientation, and high context and low context proposed by Hall are selected as the theoretical framework of this thesis.

### ***3.2 Analysis of McDonald's Advertisements***

#### ***3.2.1 Collectivism and Individualism***

Firstly, collectivism and individualism mainly emphasize the relationship between collective and individual in culture. Collectivism usually means that the culture pays more attention to the interests of groups. In collectivism, the relationship between people is more emphasized. People pay more attention to how people as an individual play a role in collective relations and create collective value, while individualism tends to emphasize individual interests and values (Li Yanwei et al. 44). In individualism, the relationship between people is relatively loose, people pay more attention to personal goals and self-realization.

China is a typical collectivist country, and Chinese culture emphasizes the role of “us”. In Chinese culture, people often pursue collective honor and value. They value interpersonal relationship very much. Therefore, in China, McDonald's advertisements usually focus on family gatherings or friends gatherings. Take the Spring Festival series of advertisements introduced by McDonald's during the Spring Festival in 2019 as an example. The ad tells the changes of two generation during the Spring Festival from the perspective of young people and parents. The ad mainly shows family warmth and Spring Festival gathering, and finally take “McDonald's has a happy Chinese year

with you.” as a concluding remarks, which emphasizes the importance of returning to the family and the warmth of the family. This form of advertising comes mainly from the cultural background of Chinese collectivism.

On the contrary, the United States, as a typical country with strong individualistic culture, puts more emphasis on “you”, “I” and “he”. In American culture, people tend to pursue personal independence, freedom and value creation. They value themselves in society more. Therefore, in the United States, McDonald's advertisements usually emphasize personality and freedom, focusing on the personal enjoyment of McDonald's time. For example, the young girl with McDonald's is on the phone; the man in suits is enjoying McDonald's breakfast among busy working people, and so on happen in McDonald's advertisements. In these advertisements, personal value, personal will and personality play have been well interpreted.

### **3.2.2 High Context and Low Context**

Secondly, context refers to the environment in which language is used. According to the differences of different cultures, context can be divided into high context and low context. High-context culture refers to the culture in which the listener has acquired sufficient background information and does not need to repeat the background knowledge to the listener in the dialogue; while low-context culture refers to the culture in which the listener does not have sufficient background information, so background information needs to be repeated and emphasized constantly in the dialogue (qtd. in Xu, and Wu 110).

China is a representative country of high context culture. Chinese culture emphasizes implicitness and modesty, so Chinese often do not express directly, but hide their intentions in the lines. Therefore, McDonald's advertisements in China sometimes promote McDonald's products indirectly, and reflect the theme of the advertisement through the implication of words and images. For example, in China, McDonald's advertisements often appear as endorsements of Kris Wu and other popular stars, and micro-films in cooperation with popular movies. To some extent, these advertisements have produced a hint to the audience: the choice of McDonald's is in line with the trend, while the United States belongs to a low-context culture. The expression of American culture usually emphasizes direct expression, and directly expresses intentions through dialogues. Therefore, McDonald's advertisements in the United States are usually more direct. For example, “I'm lovin' it “. Such a direct advertising slogan clearly reflects the characteristics of low context in American culture.

### **3.2.3 Time Orientation**

Thirdly, time orientation mainly emphasizes the time orientation of different cultural groups, that is, the focus of different cultures on the development of things. Long-term oriented culture emphasizes the continuity of the past and the future, referring to the accumulation of time in the process of development. People in this culture usually think that experience and inheritance are very important, advocating history as a reference for the present and future, while short-term oriented culture emphasizes the present and the future (Li Yanwei et al. 45). People in short-term oriented culture focus on the present and are good at planning for the future. They do not think that experience and history play an important role in future development, they pay more attention to innovative development in the future.

Chinese culture is extensive and profound, which attaches great importance to the heritage of history, and there is no doubt that China is a country with long-term cultural orientation. McDonald's advertising in China usually adopts the means of reviewing history to show its own value. For example, the advertisement launched by McDonald's in 2019 during the National Day of China, which focuses on the development of McDonald's in China, tells the development and changes of China after McDonald's entry into China since 1990. It emphasizes the continuity of history and expectations for the future. It also conveys the brand culture of McDonald's from another level. This form of advertising comes mainly from China's long-term-orientation cultural background.

What's more, for a short-term culture-oriented country like the United States, people pay more attention to current and future development. McDonald's advertisements in the United States mostly use a simple and straightforward way to convey brand culture to the audience. For example, a group of advertisements designed for McDonald's from TBWA in the United States uses fuzzy technology. Strictly speaking, there is no clear McDonald's logo on the picture of the advertisement. It only uses the classic McDonald's color matching and a slogan “say no more” to show McDonald's classic brand culture. It also reflects the short-term orientation of American culture, which ignores the inertia of historical experience and conveys its attitude towards the present and the future in a brand-new, simple and straightforward way.

#### **4. Inspiration of Cultural Difference between China and America through the McDonald's Advertisements**

Through the above-mentioned research on Chinese and American culture, which takes collectivism and individualism, long-term orientation and short-term orientation in Hofstede's cultural dimension theory as well as the high-context and low-context proposed by Hall as the theoretical framework, and McDonald's advertising as the realistic resource, it is easy to see the characteristics and differences of Chinese and American culture, and the cleverness of McDonald, a multinational company, in dealing with cultural understanding.

First of all, McDonald's advertisements try to establish a local image in the Chinese market by expressing Chinese culture. In McDonald's Chinese advertising, it is not difficult to see that McDonald's advertising combines the value of its products with Chinese culture, such as celebrating the Spring Festival, meeting friends, fashion stars and celebrating the National Day. The themes of these advertisements range from traditional Chinese culture to novel fashion culture, which reflects the characteristics of Chinese cultural collectivism, high context and long-term orientation. Under the influence of these cultural factors, although McDonald's is a foreign brand, it has succeeded in establishing its own local cultural image suitable for Chinese culture in the Chinese market.

Secondly, McDonald's advertising retains its own American characteristics. McDonald is from the United States, and its advertising is always wrapped in American culture, which is beyond doubt (Li Jie 113). Opening McDonald's American advertisements, there are a wide range of advertisements on personality, enjoyment, activeness, innovation and other topics. These advertisements with strong American culture vividly reflect the cultural characteristics of "individualism", "low context" and "short-term orientation" which change with the times in the United States.

Finally, McDonald's advertising has leaped over cultural barriers and gradually developed into a trend of cultural integration. In McDonald's advertisements in China, there are not only advertisements with traditional Chinese culture, but also advertisements with American culture, such as "personality" and "youth". Similarly, in McDonald's American advertisements, the themes of family and friendship, which belong to Chinese culture, are often mentioned. In McDonald's advertisements, the trend of integration of eastern and Western cultural values is becoming more and more obvious. For example, although the main consumer group of McDonald's is young people, in both Chinese and American McDonald's advertisements, "personality" and "success" have always been its emphasis. The phenomenon of cultural integration reflected in McDonald's advertisements also reflects the trend of global localization. Economic globalization requires more and more understanding of multiculturalism. This also reminds other transnational corporations that if they want to gain certain economic benefits in other countries, besides their strong economic, technological and managerial strength, their ability to understand multiculturalism is also the strength that should be grasped.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Advertising as a cultural product can reflect a variety of cultures. Through the analysis of McDonald's advertisements on the cultural differences between China and the United States, the following conclusions was drawn: Chinese culture pays more attention to collectivism, American culture pays more attention to individualism; Chinese culture belongs to high-context culture, American culture belongs to low-context culture; Chinese culture is long-term oriented culture, and American culture is short-term oriented culture. This paper also finds that with the development of economic globalization, the cultural boundaries in advertising are becoming more and more blurred. Therefore, the study of Chinese and American culture in this paper only applies to most cases. As Wang once pointed out, globalization and localization in today's era have reached a level that can not be separated (154). Thus, the operation of multinational companies must learn to adapt to the trend of global localization today.

In conclusion, the cultural differences between China and America is analyzed through McDonald's advertisements at the basis of collectivism and individualism, long-term orientation and short-term orientation in Hofstede's cultural dimension theory as well as the high-context and low-context proposed by Hall. The inspiration of cultural differences between China and America through the McDonald's advertisements and conclusion is given accordingly in the final part.

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