Gender Attitudes towards the Advertising of Controversial Products in China

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The recent opening up of the Chinese economy has seen a rapid growth in the advertising industry, which has also led to the exposure of advertising for socially sensitive, or controversial, products to the Chinese community. This paper surveys 238 Chinese students to determine their level of offence at various gender/sex-related products and the main reasons for offence towards advertising. Comparisons between genders were made to discover any significant differences.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years China has been a country undergoing enormous change, from a strict communist state to a modernized socialist economy that is opening up to foreign investment and competition. Along with these economic developments there have been changes in some political, social, and cultural elements of Chinese society. In the area of advertising, for instance, the industry has seen massive growth, particularly with the influx of foreign advertisers, mostly from Japan and the United States, which has, in turn, caused various problems (Ho and Chan 1989; Parsons 1993; Liang and Jacobs 1994; Cheng 1996; Ha 1996).

After the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, the Communists allowed some advertising, with agencies being merged to become state owned and foreign involvement virtually ceasing (Cheng 1996). During the Cultural Revolution (1966–69), the Chinese rulers were ideologically opposed to advertising, describing it as a “societal waste” and a “capitalist tool,” which resulted in the end of commercial advertising and the closing down of advertising agencies. Three decades later, in 1979, it was announced that me-
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dia could once again carry advertisements for local and overseas products and since then the industry has been booming (Chang 1989; Parsons 1993; Cheng 1996; Ha 1996).

There are some advertisements for products or visual/verbal images that may offend certain people in the community or clash with the traditional Chinese values (Chinese Culture Connection 1987). The issue of controversial or offensive advertising has been raised in western countries (Wilson and West 1981; Rehman and Brooks 1987; Shao and Hill 1994; Fahy, Smart, Pride and Ferrell 1995; Barnes and Dotson 1990; Waller, 1999), but little discussion has focussed on Asian countries (Waller and Fam 2000). The opening up of the Chinese economy, the use of a standardized approach to advertising across Asia, and new media, such as satellite television and the Internet (Tai 1997), has meant that the Chinese people have a greater opportunity of exposure to potentially offensive advertising. This includes advertising of such gender/sex-related products as contraceptives, underwear, and feminine hygiene products.

During these recent years of change, women in China have been achieving steady gains in education and work. Although some of the stereotypical views on gender are changing, the older generations still hold the views that women's traditional role is in the home looking after the family. With more women now receiving higher education, however, they will have more freedom in airing their opinions and making decisions. Women in China are also receiving more attention from advertisers, therefore, it is important to examine Chinese women’s views on certain gender/sex-related controversial products and compare them to the men’s views.

The research objectives for this paper are firstly to determine which gender/sex-related product advertisements the Chinese sample found offensive; secondly to determine the main reasons for offence at advertising in general; and thirdly to discover if there are any differences in attitudes between the genders. This will be achieved by analysing the results of a survey of 238 Chinese students.

GENDER-SEX RELATED PRODUCTS

Advertising literature analyzing controversial advertising is found in studies describing the products as: “unmentionables,” “socially sensitive products,” “decent products,” or “acceptable advertising,” “controversial advertising” or “offensive advertising” (Wilson and West 1981; Rehman and Brooks 1987; Shao and Hill 1994; Fahy, Smart, Pride and Ferrell 1995; Barnes and Dotson 1990; Waller, 1999; Waller and Fam 2000). These studies have primarily focused on attitudes toward the advertising of various controversial products, legal restrictions on advertising, and possible strategies for marketing sensitive products. A definition of controversial products was presented by Wilson and West (1981) and has since been supported by Triff, Benningfield and
Murphy (1987), Fahy, Smart, Pride and Ferrell (1995), and Waller (1999). Wilson and West (1981, 92) defined “unmentionables” as “products, services, or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality, or even fear tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented.”

Various types of products, both goods and services, have been suggested in past studies as being controversial when advertised, including cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives, underwear, and political advertising. As this study is primarily focussing on gender differences, the products to be used in the analysis are gender/sex-related products: condoms, female contraceptives, female hygiene products, female underwear, male underwear, and sexual diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention). These were chosen as it was felt that these products might generate a stronger response of “offensiveness” between the genders. Wilson and West (1981), in their study of “unmentionables,” included “products” such as personal hygiene and birth control. However, when revisiting this issue Wilson and West (1995) suggested how the AIDS issue had changed what was previously thought of as “unmentionable.” Feminine Hygiene Products was the main focus of Rehman and Brooks (1987), but they also included undergarments, alcohol, pregnancy tests, contraceptives, medications, and VD services as examples of controversial products. When asked about the acceptability of various products being advertised on television, only two products were seen as unacceptable by a sample of college students: contraceptives for men and contraceptives for women. Feminine Hygiene Products have also been mentioned in industry articles as having advertisements that are in “poor taste,” “irritating” and “most hated” (Alter 1982; Hume 1988; Rickard 1994).

Alan Shao undertook a large global study of advertising agency attitudes regarding various issues including the legal restrictions on advertising of “sensitive” products, which can be controversial for the agency that handles the account (Shao 1993; Shao and Hill 1994). The products/services discussed in these studies were cigarettes, alcohol, condoms, female hygiene products, female undergarments, male undergarments, sexual diseases (for example, STDs, AIDS), and pharmaceutical goods. Barnes and Dotson (1990) discussed offensive television advertising and identified two different dimensions: offensive products and offensive execution. The products which were in their list included condoms, female hygiene products, female undergarments, and male undergarments.

These studies were considered when compiling the list of gender/sex-related products for analysis for this study. The type of products chosen were potentially socially sensitive in the Chinese community. The list of products could clash with traditional Chinese values, like keeping oneself disinterested and pure, having few desires, respect for tradition, and moderation, that is, following “the middle way” and having a sense of “shame” (Chinese Culture Connection 1987, 147–148).

According to Stern (1999), “since the 1980s, gender research has been
enriched by multicultural studies, which provided the impetus for incorporating variables other than biological sex-race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, education, and so forth” (1, 2). This study will continue this type of research by analysing a sample of 238 Chinese students to determine their level of offence towards the advertising of various controversial products and the main reasons for offence. To gain an insight into possible variations in gender perceptions towards the advertising of various gender/sex-related products, comparisons will be made based on gender, and some implications will be drawn regarding the results and Chinese culture.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted to gauge levels of offence at the advertising of various gender/sex-related products, and the questionnaire was distributed to students of a large, regionally based multi-campus university in Wuhan, China. Using university students as subjects has been a research method practiced for many years in the area of controversial advertising (Rehman and Brooks 1987; Waller 1999), mainly because of their accessibility to the researcher and their homogeneity as a group (Calder, Phillips and Tybout 1981). A total of 238 students were sampled, 160 (67.2 percent) male and 78 (32.8 percent) female. The average age of the total sample was 25 years old with ages ranging from 17 to 40 years old, and the modal age was 21 years old (50 or 21 percent).

The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete and was administered in a classroom environment. The questions asked in the study were developed from those used in Waller (1999). The format of the survey instrument included two main sections that comprised a five point Likert type scale from which respondents were given
(1) a list of products/services and
(2) a list of reasons for offensive advertising.

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of personal “offence” on a five point scale, where 1 means “Not At All” offensive and 5 means “Extremely” offensive. The list of gender/sex-related products were condoms, female contraceptives, female hygiene products, female underwear, male underwear, and sexual diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention).

The reasons for offence were also taken from past literature (Shao and Hill 1994); although Western/US images were added to determine whether Western images were perceived to be offensive to the Chinese respondents. The list of reasons included: anti-social behaviour, indecent language, nudity, racist images, sexist images, subject too personal and western/US images. To test the reliability of the items in the groups, a Cronbach Alpha was run which resulted in scores of 0.741 for the gender/sex-related products, and 0.607 for the reasons for offence, thereby both having scores above 0.6 which is acceptable. It is felt that for the second group, the variety of reasons for offence offered, including issues about sexism, racism, decency and western images, would explain its
lower score. The results were then analysed in total (to answer research objectives 1 and 2) and then comparisons were made based on gender to determine whether there were any possible variations in gender perceptions by the groups towards gender/sex-related product advertising in China (to answer research objective 3).

RESULTS

Overall, the Chinese respondents indicated that advertisements for gender/sex-related products were not perceived to be a very offensive type of advertising. Only one item had a score above the mid-point of “3,” indicating a degree of offence, which was “Sexual Diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention),” although “Condoms,” had a score above the mid-point of “3” for female respondents, but below “3” for males and for the total mean. This answers research objective 1. As for the reasons they found advertisements offensive, the total sample indicated five items that had a mean score above “3” indicating a level of offence. These were: “Indecent Language,” “Anti-Social Behaviour,” “Racist Images,” “Nudity” and “Western/US Images.” It should be noted that with the last two items, males did not find “Nudity” offensive, while females did not find “Western/US Images” offensive (but the score of 2.97 is not significantly different from the midpoint indicating neither offence nor no offence). This answers research objective 2. The results, including totals of those who indicated that the item was not offensive, uncertain and offensive, mean scores, standard deviations and rank, for the total sample, male and female respondents, and the ANOVA results (F value and p significance) is found in Table 1.

The questionnaire found similar results among the male and female respondents with level of offence and the general ranking of the products and reasons based on the mean score. ANOVAs were used to compare the male and female responses to determine differences. Of the six products given, three (50 percent) were significantly different at the 0.05 level. Females tended to be more offended than males by advertisements for condoms, female contraceptives, and male underwear. Two of the seven reasons given were significantly different, with females being more offended than their male counterparts by “Nudity” and “Sexist Images.” The male’s mean scores for both were less than “3,” indicating no offence to these items, however, it is usually females who are the focus of nudity or sexism in advertising. This answers research objective 3.

IMPLICATIONS

As China makes the transition into a modernized socialist economy, the Chinese community will be confronted with issues and images that may offend. From the results, advertisements about the issue of sexual diseases, such as
Table 1: Products and reasons for offensive advertising

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Not Offensive Number (%)</th>
<th>Uncertain Number (%)</th>
<th>Offensive Number (%)</th>
<th>Total Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Male Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Female Mean (SD)</th>
<th>F value (p Sig)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sexual Diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention)</td>
<td>60 (25.2)</td>
<td>24 (10.1)</td>
<td>154 (64.7)</td>
<td>3.74 (1.44)</td>
<td>3.75 (1.42) [1]</td>
<td>3.73 (1.49) [1]</td>
<td>.009 (.923)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Condoms</td>
<td>98 (41.5)</td>
<td>54 (22.9)</td>
<td>84 (35.6)</td>
<td>2.92 (1.44)</td>
<td>2.73 (1.43) [2]</td>
<td>3.32 (1.38) [2]</td>
<td>9.320 (.003) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Female Contraceptives</td>
<td>134 (56.3)</td>
<td>48 (20.2)</td>
<td>56 (23.5)</td>
<td>2.55 (1.23)</td>
<td>2.38 (1.20) [4]</td>
<td>2.91 (1.23) [3]</td>
<td>10.251 (.002) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Female Hygiene</td>
<td>124 (52.1)</td>
<td>66 (27.7)</td>
<td>48 (20.2)</td>
<td>2.49 (1.24)</td>
<td>2.49 (1.28) [3]</td>
<td>2.50 (1.17) [6]</td>
<td>.005 (.942)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Female Underwear</td>
<td>137 (57.6)</td>
<td>54 (22.7)</td>
<td>47 (19.7)</td>
<td>2.35 (1.30)</td>
<td>2.25 (1.29) [5]</td>
<td>2.56 (1.32) [4]</td>
<td>3.074 (.081)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Male Underwear</td>
<td>142 (59.7)</td>
<td>61 (25.6)</td>
<td>35 (14.7)</td>
<td>2.26 (1.15)</td>
<td>2.11 (1.06) [6]</td>
<td>2.55 (1.29) [5]</td>
<td>7.805 (.006) *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Indecent Language</td>
<td>62 (26.1)</td>
<td>47 (19.7)</td>
<td>129 (54.2)</td>
<td>3.47 (1.32)</td>
<td>3.36 (1.35) [2]</td>
<td>3.68 (1.24) [2]</td>
<td>3.033 (.083)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Anti-Social Behaviour</td>
<td>56 (23.5)</td>
<td>69 (29.0)</td>
<td>113 (47.5)</td>
<td>3.43 (1.29)</td>
<td>3.41 (1.32) [1]</td>
<td>3.49 (1.22) [3]</td>
<td>.206 (.651)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Racist Images</td>
<td>70 (29.4)</td>
<td>55 (23.1)</td>
<td>113 (47.5)</td>
<td>3.27 (1.37)</td>
<td>3.24 (1.37) [3]</td>
<td>3.33 (1.39) [4]</td>
<td>.222 (.638)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Nudity</td>
<td>79 (33.2)</td>
<td>61 (25.6)</td>
<td>98 (41.2)</td>
<td>3.20 (1.33)</td>
<td>2.92 (1.27) [5]</td>
<td>3.77 (1.28) [1]</td>
<td>23.445 (.000) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Western/US Images</td>
<td>86 (36.1)</td>
<td>55 (23.1)</td>
<td>97 (40.8)</td>
<td>3.13 (1.41)</td>
<td>3.20 (1.44) [4]</td>
<td>2.97 (1.34) [6]</td>
<td>1.348 (.247)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Sexist Images</td>
<td>106 (44.5)</td>
<td>57 (23.9)</td>
<td>75 (31.6)</td>
<td>2.74 (1.35)</td>
<td>2.49 (1.30) [7]</td>
<td>3.26 (1.30) [5]</td>
<td>18.046 (.000) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Subject Too Personal</td>
<td>114 (47.9)</td>
<td>62 (26.1)</td>
<td>62 (26.0)</td>
<td>2.68 (1.17)</td>
<td>2.64 (1.13) [6]</td>
<td>2.76 (1.26) [7]</td>
<td>.483 (.488)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05
Advertising Controversial Products in China

AIDS and STD prevention, have a strong potential for offending both male and female members of the community. This issue is a socially sensitive one in the Chinese community, with the Chinese government being criticized in the west for not doing enough for AIDS sufferers. Advertising messages for such an issue would also conflict with the traditional Chinese values of keeping oneself disinterested and pure and having a sense of shame (Chinese Culture Connection 1987).

The next two products on the list related to contraceptives, “Condoms” and “Female Contraceptives.” Only condoms received a mean score greater than the midpoint (“3”) from the female respondents, but both resulted in statistically significant differences in the responses from males and females, with females being more offended. This reflects a degree of embarrassment when talking about sexual behaviour in public which has been made an important issue in China with the establishment of the “one child” policy.

As for the reasons for advertisements being offensive, “Indecent Language,” “Anti-Social Behaviour,” and “Racist Images” were perceived as the “top 3” reasons, with both males and females indicating a degree of offence. These issues would go against traditional values that would seek to maintain social harmony. “Nudity” and “Western/US Images” were also reasons for regarding advertising as offensive, but the scores differed between the sexes with males not finding “Nudity” offensive and females not finding “Western/US Images” offensive. “Nudity” and “S*xist Images” were the only reasons which show a significant difference between the male and female respondents, with both reasons being related to the issue of sex. Apart from “Sexual Diseases (AIDS, STD prevention)” and “Condoms,” the reasons were more important than the gender/s*x-related products in causing offence.

This would indicate that the Chinese respondents are quite conservative in their views relating to the advertising of issues or products related to sex. Marketers of these products, or those involved in social marketing, should be aware of this when advertising in the Chinese market. Care should be taken in such socially sensitive areas so that members of the community are not offended and the message is still successfully communicated.

CONCLUSION

As never before, the Chinese community is now exposed to advertisements for socially sensitive or controversial products that may cause offence. This paper surveyed 238 Chinese students to determine their level of offence towards various gender/s*x-related products and the main reasons for offence towards advertising. It found that advertising of “Sexual Disease (AIDS, STD prevention)” and advertisements with indecent language, anti-social behaviour, racist images, nudity and western/US images were the main types of advertisements that caused offence to the Chinese sample. Comparisons between the genders were made which found differences in attitudes towards
the advertising of contraceptives and images related to sex. For those involved with controversial products or planning potentially controversial campaigns in China, it appears that they should be aware of the conservative nature of the Chinese community, and the potential to offend the public with sex-related products and images.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the current study analysed a comparatively small sample of students in one part of China (Wuhan), and, therefore, should not be generalised to the whole population of China. It does, however, present some important findings that should be researched further. In particular, further research should be continued into the area of attitudes towards controversial and offensive advertising, especially observing the influence of culture and gender. Ways should also be found to effectively advertise such issues as AIDS or STD prevention as well as contraceptives that do not offend the community but still clearly communicate the intended message. Such issues are very important for the future of the Chinese community and should not be ignored because the advertising of the message has the potential of causing offence.

WORKS CITED