

## ARE ADVERTISEMENTS SHAPING OUR CONSCIOUSNESS? AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CHINESE NEW YEAR PRINT AND TV ADVERTISEMENTS

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### Abstract

Social scientists have long believed that cultural values differ widely, particularly around such socially embedded issues as status, gender, family, ethics, and mores. Advertising helps to affect a “transfer of values” by establishing a nexus between what a culture views as desirable states of being and particular products. This research is a study on print advertisements during the 2007 Chinese New Year session that appeared in the main English daily, *The Star*. To what extent does Chinese New Year messages affect consumers’ consciousness on cultural values? Semiotic analysis and personal interviews were used to answer these research questions. Consumers are aware of the commercial driven-purpose of these advertisements. They appeared to know the intention of the advertisers of “playing with their consciousness” and had thus put up their defenses.

### Apakah Iklan Membentuk Kesedaran Kita? Analisis Iklan Cetak dan Iklan Televisyen Terpilih

### Abstrak

Saintis sosial sememangnya berpegang bahawa nilai budaya berbeza khususnya dengan perbezaan status, gender, famili, etika dan moral. Periklanan membantu “memindahkan nilai” dengan mewujudkan hubungan apa yang dianggap sebagai menggalakkan dengan sesuatu produk itu. Kajian ini terhadap iklan cetak yang disiarkan semasa perayaan Tahun Baru Cina 2007 yang disiarkan dalam akhbar *The Star*. Tujuannya ialah untuk menentukan bagaimana mesej Tahun Baru Cina memberi kesan kepada kesedaran pengguna tentang nilai budaya. Analisis semiotic dan temubual mendalam telah digunakan dalam kajian ini. Pengguna sedar bahawa iklan bermotifkan komersil. Mereka sedar niat pengiklan yang “bermain dengan kesedaran” mereka.

**Keywords:** *advertisement, values, culture, lifestyle, media, semiotics*

### Introduction

D.M. Potter wrote in 1954,

*“Advertising has joined the charmed circle of institutions which fix the values and standards of society...and it becomes necessary to consider with special care the*

*extend and nature of its influence, how far it extends, and in what way it makes itself felt.”*

The above-mentioned quotation tells of the pervasiveness of advertising in molding the American culture more than fifty years ago to the extent that the author urged for studies on the phenomena.

Jhally (2003) wrote about the difficulties in locating the origins of “*our most cherished values and assumptions.*” He gave us the example on how diamonds, a one-time object of financial investment eventually became culturally linked to romantic love. According to him, the idea of diamonds being a symbol of commitment and everlasting love was merely a creation of New York based advertising agency, N.W. Ayers, whom in 1938, was hired to change public attitude toward diamonds (Jhally 2003).

Values are simply property of objects, individuals, institutions, toward which people have an affective regard (Sivaram 1991). Rokeach (1973) defines values as:

*“A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of or end state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end state of existence. A value system is an enduring organizations of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.”*

Thus, values are very important determinants of behaviour, both in personal and social life. They are the co-ordinates of virtually all kinds of human interaction (Sivaram 1991). Much of research relating to global advertising has focused on the question of cultural convergence as measured by social values and lifestyles represented in advertising (Leiss et al. 2005). Pollay and Gallagher (1990) found that North American advertising focused on “*certain attitudes, behaviors and values, lifestyles and philosophies,*” and they believed that over time, advertising normalized “*materialism, submission and seduction, selfishness and greed, leading to a dissatisfaction with life, disrespect of family elders, tradition and authority, and a potential rise in crime rates*”. In the words of Hoggart (1958), advertising takes advantage of consumers’ appetites and creates around them a fantasy that tends “*towards a view of the world in which progress is conceived as a seeking of material possessions, equality as a moral leveling and freedom as the ground for endless irresponsible pleasure. These productions belong to a vicarious, spectators’ world.*”

Anthropologists have long believed that cultural values differ widely, particularly around such socially embedded issues as status, gender, family, ethics, and mores.

A variety of institutions help in the transmission of cultural values within a society. Traditionally, these have been the family, religious institutions, universities, judicial courts, etc. Jhally (2003), in one of his critical writings on the advertising industry says that the influence of these institutions waned in the transition to industrial society and then consumer society. The emerging institution of the marketplace occupied the cultural terrain left void by the evacuation of these older forms of societal institutions. Within the marketplace,

advertising has emerged as the major institution concerned with the portrayal and transmission of cultural values, either explicitly or implicitly (Sivaram 1991).

Advertising helps to affect a “transfer of values” by establishing a nexus between what a culture views as desirable states of being and particular products. In the words of Williamson (1978), they (advertising) form a vast superstructure with an apparently autonomous existence and immense influence.

### **Literature Review**

Since this paper is concerned with the representations of advertisements by Malaysians, this review will specifically mention previous studies on cultural values within the Asian context. The study of cultural values and their relationship to marketing communication has been a popular area of study since the 1987 study orchestrated by Michael Bond with his international network of colleagues, called the Chinese Culture Connection. This study revealed four dimensions (Chinese Value Survey or CVS) of cultural valuing in which country scores on these four factors were correlated with those derived from Hofstede. Three of the factors from CVS correlated at high levels with three of Hofstede’s four.

Sivaram (1991) examines Indian television advertising, focusing on the portrayal of cultural values. Using a modified version of Pollay’s coding framework to analyze a sample of Indian television commercials to identify the predominant cultural values, the study revealed that Indian television commercials, to a large extent, promote values of high-technology and modernization, as well as consumerism.

Mueller (1992) examines the nature of Western advertising in Japan and to determine if the level of Westernization has increased or decreased over the past decade. Tsao (1994) examines through content analysis, cultural values that were manifested in advertising in Taiwan from 1981 to 1990. The study reveals a sharp contrast on the reflection of cultural characteristics in the advertising of the two different periods.

Cheng & Schweitzer’s (1996) study indicate that Chinese advertising is a “melting pot” of Eastern and Western cultural values and a “double distorted mirror” that reflects advertising’s commercial nature with a strong tendency to fit into the “idiosyncratic” social reality in China. They also found that cultural values depicted in Chinese television commercials have much to do with product categories and product origins.

The study by Sengupta and Frith (1997) addresses the question as to what degree Western cultural imperialism can be considered to be propagated through TV advertising in India. The study also examines the use of cultural values and the application of Western icons in advertisements of multinational corporations and solely Indian owned businesses. The results highlight specific differences and the varying degree of importance attached to different cultural values in India and the West.

The subject on the emergence of Cultural China as a product of global change in the post cold war era was examined by Frith and Tsao (1998). Both discusses some of the defining aspects to the formation of Cultural China and the implications they hold for advertising strategies

targeting the group.

Wong (2000) examines the differences of values portrayed through a series of advertisements for two commercial banks for the 70s and 80s. The study shows the reconfiguration of traditional Chinese values to accommodate the arrival of consumerism in Hong Kong.

Chan and Cheng (2002), in their comparative study between China and Hong Kong in 1993 and 1998 observes that the five cultural values that dominated Chinese television advertising were 'modernity', 'family', 'tradition', 'technology' and 'collectivism'. The five dominant cultural values in Hong Kong television advertising were 'quality', 'effectiveness', 'economy', 'enjoyment' and 'modernity'. Hong Kong commercials used more Western values, while Chinese commercials used more Eastern ones, Chinese commercials used more symbolic values, while those in Hong Kong used more utilitarian ones.

Zhang and Harwood (2004) study on 3 Chinese TV stations found that the most dominant value themes in the Chinese commercials were product quality/effectiveness, family, modernity, beauty/youth, and pleasure indicating the prevalence of utilitarian values and the coexistence of both traditional and modern values in the world of Chinese advertising.

Frith, Shaw and Cheng (2005) analyze the content of advertisements from women's fashion and beauty magazines in 3 countries to compare how beauty is encoded and found a noticeable difference between the portrayals of women from U.S. and from the two East Asian societies in terms of their sexual portrayal. These findings suggest that beauty in the U.S. may be constructed more in terms of "the body" whereas in Singapore and Taiwan the defining factor is more related to a pretty face.

### **Scope of this Research**

This research is a study on print advertisements during the 2007 Chinese New Year session that appeared in the main English daily, *The Star*. Chinese New Year greeting advertisements do not appear in the Malay language and Tamil newspapers. As such, they are not included in this study.

### **The Significance of Chinese New Year**

Chinese New Year or the Spring Festival is traditionally celebrated by Chinese all over the world is a time for thanksgiving and good wishes. This goes back to ancient China when society then was still very much an agriculture one. A new year then marked the beginning of spring when farmers looked forward to rest after a year of hard work (Leong 1979).

Until today, Chinese still attached great importance to the significance and celebration of the lunar year. The highlight of the celebration is the reunion dinner held in each household on New Year's eve. This is a time for the whole family, from near and far to get together. The dinner is held for several reasons; to strengthen family ties, to see the old year out and to welcome the new year.

Young people go visiting and older people stay at home to receive visitors. Young people are usually given presents in the form of cash in red packets known as *Hong Bao*. "Young"

includes all unmarried persons of both sexes. It is not uncommon for a person, maybe thirty or forty years old, to receive this red packet from his parents or relatives because he is still “young”. Auspicious words are said in New Year greetings (Lee 2006).

### **Problem Statement**

Given the earlier mentioned background, we attempt to establish the problem statement of this study. We phrase it as: To what extent does advertisers’ Chinese New Year messages affect consumers’ consciousness on cultural values?

### **Objectives of this Research**

What do readers take-away from the Chinese New Year advertisements? What are the values represented in these advertisements? Thus, the first objective of this study is to understand the meanings constructed by the readers from the series of advertisements presented to them.

All advertisements are purposeful as they are created to have some effects. The desired impact is formally stated as the advertiser’s objective, which is the measurable goal or result that the advertising is intended to achieve (Wells et al. 2007). As these objectives are components of the overall communication plan for the brand or product, these objectives are normally hidden from the audience. Van Packard (1957), in his enormously popular, *The Hidden Persuaders*, explained the many ways, we are being influenced and manipulated, far more than we realized, in the patterns of our everyday lives. In his 1959 work, *The Status Seekers*, he wrote about how large scale efforts are made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions, and our thought processes by the use of insights taken from psychiatry and the social sciences. Typically, these efforts take place beneath our level of awareness.

Thus, our second objective is to discover if the consumers view the advertisements studied as explicitly commercially driven.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions were formulated for the purpose of this study.

RQ1: What are the dominant cultural values conveyed in the festive advertisements studied?

RQ2: Do the festive advertisements promote a pro-actively consumerist lifestyle?

RQ3: If yes, are consumers aware that advertisers are promoting a pro-actively consumerist lifestyle?

### **Research Methods**

Two research methods were used to answer these three research questions; they are semiotic analysis and personal interviews.

### **Semiotics analysis**

One of the chief methods that cultural studies use to understand culture is through semiotics. Semiotics is simply the study of signs or words. A semiotic analysis of the images in a magazine ad would look at the different images as if they were words or signs. Saussure believed that semiotics could be used to analyze a large number of ‘sign systems’, and for this reason, there is no reason why it could not be applied to any media or cultural form (Stokes

2003). Semiotics breaks down the content of texts into their component parts and relates them to broader discourses (Stokes 2003). According to Berger (1987), the method involves putting into words how images work by relating them to the ideological structure which organizes meaning.

Judith Williamson's groundbreaking study of the semiotics of advertising analyses several advertisements taken from women's magazines (Williamson 1978). Williamson's work is influenced by an ideological position critical of capitalism, yet the semiotic approach she takes contributes to the development of semiotics today (Stokes 2004).

Avraham and First (2003) used semiotic analysis to examine how central components of U.S. nation-state/national sphere that are language, flag, political leaders, borders, landscapes, and sights are reflected in Israeli's advertising.

### **Stage One**

The object of analysis are the dominant values appearing in the advertisements studied. 31 full colour and 1 B/W ads from STAR that appeared between 17-18 February 2007 were used for analysis. Chinese New Year in 2007 fell on 18 and 19 February. There was no publication on 19 February. The advertisements collected represented all the Chinese New Year advertisements published in STAR on the two days. STAR was selected as it has the highest readership among all the English language dailies, which was 1,474,000 readers (Synovate Media Atlas Q4 2006) (Star 2007).

The next stage is to describe the texts, denotatively. At this stage, we look at the setting, poses, colours, cultural artifacts, etc.

Then, we interpret the texts connotatively. This stage allows us to begin to discuss the meanings and implications of each separate sign individually and then collectively. What is the relationship between the linguistic signs and the images? How do the two codes of signification work in relation to one another? Does reading the words give you a different interpretation of the images than just looking at the images alone, or are the words reinforcing the images? (Stokes 2003).

The next stage is to draw out the cultural codes. How are the images drawing on our cultural knowledge to help us create particular kinds of meaning? Are the cultural codes those one would expect from readers of this particular pool of advertisements. Next, we make generalizations about the texts studied. What can we say about the texts studied mean? From there, we move on to make conclusions. Does the analysis confirm my research questions?

### **Stage Two-Interviews**

According to Stokes (2003), semiotic analysis can also combine with participant observations or interviews. For this study, I chose interviews for its relevancy. Total individuals interviewed was 17. Interviewing offers the opportunity to delve into the everyday worlds of meanings constructed by participants. Through interviews, we can discover very complex social connections and gain insight into the cultural nuances of the participants' world (Morrison et al. 2002).

### **The subjects**

All the 17 subjects were Chinese Malaysians. There were 10 males and 7 females. All interviews were held at the respective subject's home.

### **Execution of research**

Each subject was shown the 32 advertisements displayed inside a clear folder. Subjects were given time to browse through the advertisements. Then, the subjects were interviewed. The interview starts with a casual chat with the subjects on the topic of 'Chinese New Year'. This was in the form of informal interview where subjects could say anything off the cuff. The interview proper starts when the subjects were asked several structured questions on the advertisements. Each interview lasted not more than half hour.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Generalizations from semiotics analysis**

The dominant values from the series of advertisements were "prosperity", "giving", "longevity", "bountiful", "happiness", "bonding", "tradition" and "being filial". Denotative codes were red and gold colours. These to the Chinese, are symbolic colours of luck and prosperity. The other code we noticed from these series of advertisements is the interaction of the young and the old. Cultural artifacts embedded in the background settings including red couplets, red lanterns, carvings, cheery blossoms, oranges, kumquat plants, old buildings and paintings.

We also see family members dining together which symbolizes an act of bonding. Other artifacts were lion dance, chopsticks, festive delicacies, traditional costumes, hong bao, yee sang and carbs.

Connotatively, many commercial messages were heavily embedded into the advertisements, some very subtly. For example, a message is linked to the characteristic of the product, without being explicit. In the case of Vochelle, "May you savour the sweet taste of prosperity." The "sweet taste" is the inherent characteristic of a chocolate bar. We see similar linkage in the advertisement for DiGi, "Talk for free this Chinese New Year", Toyota's, "Wishing you a safe journey", TNB's, "Powering your Chinese New Year celebration", Joven's, "Welcome the bountiful year with delightful colours..." and Life Oyster sauce's, "Celebrate with Life".

For Prudential, it was communicating their responsiveness towards the customers, an important selling point for a company who wants to be seen as caring. Thus, they used the headline, "Wishing you a harmonious New Year full of listening and understanding". Isn't that the two good attributes a good insurance sales personnel? The usual Chinese calligraphic character, "luck" has been replaced with the character that denotes, "hear".

In the Ogawa massage chair advertisement, the picture shows a happy old lady enjoying her massage chair. The headline says, "Share the joy this Chinese New Year".

Some advertisers want to communicate the idea that being in a multiracial country, the

celebration of Chinese New Year is a communal affair. Thus, we see a representation of the three main racial groups in the advertisements for Al-Rajhi Bank, Astro, Ambank Group and KTM.

Traditions are important cultural traits. Thus, it is important to ensure there is a continuity of traditions from one generation to another. The UEM Group and Astro advertisements show the passing down of tradition from an older (not necessary old) member of the community to the younger ones.

We also see a deconstruction of values as in the DiGi advertisement. Though, not very explicit as appeared on the TV commercial, the DiGi advertisement shows a group of diner talking on their respective handphone, while at the dinning table. The act of talking and eating appears to be rude to most Malaysians, not just the Chinese.

Some of the advertisements studied also show the older folks living in old houses, as in the advertisement for Ogawa, RHB Bank & Petronas. It symbolizes the sad state that they are all alone in the old house and their children have moved out to live their own lives.

### **Data analysis from interviews**

Verbatim comments were collected from the subjects. All names have been changed. Only important comments are highlighted here.

#### **Mr Lim 51**

*“A lot of negative values on unconscious way” “They want to spend, Time Square. Be a big spender” “They will only use racial value to their advantage”*

#### **Mr Wong, 34**

*“Bad thing about liquor”  
“They want to sell their products”  
“Do not see trying to revive Chinese culture”  
“Some of the companies tried to promote racial integrity”*

#### **Ms Chia, 42.**

*“Too much focus on food and drinks”  
“True meaning of get together is lost”  
“Even though we may work far away from our family, there is a sense of homegoing. You feel the need to go back to your family, to go back to your roots”  
“Shrewdness of businessmen to use whatever to get more money. Tapping on people’s heart of getting together. Tapping into celebrations”*

#### **Mr Han, 19.**

*“Having skills passed down from one generation to one, like calligraphy”  
“Happiness”  
“Unity like Chinese, Malay, Indian together”  
“Values lacking. Few people visit their parents and not necessary they will*



*invite*

*the other races to celebrate”*

*“For example, shandy company, show you this ad, they are trying to promote their drinks”*

**Miss Siah, 27**

*“Certainly a lot of good values in these advertisements”*

*“When I am old, I am afraid to be like them, living alone without their children around”*

**Miss Ng, 22**

*“They (the advertisers) just want to sell their products”*

*“They are just disguising their intention with their new year greetings”*

### **Discussion And Implications**

Despite the national education policy in place where Malay language is to be the national language, the interest in the Chinese language is still gaining strength. This can be seen in the increased enrolment in national type Chinese schools in urban areas to the dismay of decreased enrolment in the national schools. Chinese Malaysians are afraid of losing their ethnic identity, which may result in been not connected to Chinese elsewhere, particularly those in China.

On the role of overseas Chinese playing an important role in perpetuating Chineseness, Tu-Wei-ming, in the influential collection *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, says,

*“they can assume an effective role in creatively constructing a new vision of Chineseness that is more in tune with Chinese history and in sympathetic resonance with Chinese culture” (cited in Ang 2001).*

Thus, in many South East Asian nations, there appears to be a strong pull of Chinese cultural elements and this is often seen in the tolerance towards many cultural practices, including that of Chinese New Year. Even, Indonesia, which at one time during Suharto era, placed a ban on Chinese cultural practices has now lifted up restrictions on Taoist temple prayers and lion dance performances.

There appears to be a revival of “things” Chinese with the open-door policy practiced by the government of the People’s Republic of China beginning from 1978. This open-door policy has propelled China into one of the world’s biggest economic power. China is also seen as a huge market for many products, particularly fast moving consumer products. This has a great appeal on manufacturers and marketers alike. This phenomenon has kindled interests in the Chinese language, music, arts, and other aspects of the Chinese culture.

Tu Wei-ming gives us the concept, ‘Cultural China’ which is a community which shares a common written language, Chinese ethnicity and lifestyle, family ties, lingering and underlying Confucian social norms, and a Chinese self-identity ( Frith & Tsao 1998). He has

given us three symbolic universes, one of which is the 'Chinese diaspora'. The glue that ties the first, symbolic universe, i.e. the inhabitants of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, the societies with predominantly Chinese populations and the Chinese diaspora is a set of shared cultural values that transcend geopolitical boundaries. As Tu points out, "Chinese culture, the generic term symbolizing the vicissitudes of the material and spiritual accomplishments of the Chinese people" unites this symbolic region (Frith & Tsao 1998).

However, we cannot deny that globalization has had a great impact on the Chinese society, especially the younger generation. Influences from the Western media and the music industry have been particularly strong on this generation. There appears to be to a certain extent, deculturation in our society. For example, the importance and strength of the Chinese family as a unit is the foundation of the durability of Chinese civilization. There is the standard Chinese phrase, *guo-jia*, "country and family" which has always been important (Lee 2006). Yet, there appears to be an increase of "individualism" among young people today. Many values, including virtues and integrity have been abandoned, and in its place, goal-orientation, self-satisfaction and success. The old Confucian adage of the young respecting the old and the old respecting the young seems to be a thing of the past. The spirit of "individualism" has replaced the spirit of "collectivism". A reflection of this is seen in the DiGi advertisement. In this advertisement, we are confronted with a group of family members sitting down for a Chinese New Year reunion dinner, and instead of enjoying their meal, they were all conversing on their hand set. Perhaps the message is clearer in the television commercial. In the television commercial, a young child of about 10 years old is a participant in this reunion dinner. The commercial shows her with a perplex look wondering what these fellow diners are up to when they are conversing and not eating. It shows a deculturation of the Chinese culture. The reunion dinner is an auspicious occasion of family togetherness. The act of conversing on the hand set during the dinner gives a representation of rudeness and disrespect for fellow diners.

It was discovered from this study that the Petronas advertisement was the most likeable. One reason cited is because the advertisement does not attempt to sell the advertiser's brand or product. The advertisement communicates the need for younger Malaysians to be more concern for their old folks. This is in line with the Confucian teaching of filial piety, a practice that is waning in our society today. Respondents felt emotional after looking at this particular advertisements, It reminds them of a television commercial from the 2006 Chinese New Year which portrays a group of nursing home inmates discussing about the achievements of their successful children, yet these children are no there to be with them, except the one who appeared "the least successful." That commercial communicates the fact that being successful is not the license to neglect their older folks who have brought them up. This brings me to another TV commercial produced several years ago by the automobile company, Perodua. In the TV commercial, an old lady was seen engaged in a conversation, talking about preparation for the Chinese New Year reunion dinner, a very important annual event in her life. We later learned that she was engaged in a monologue ( probably a symptom of aging) and that she was alone, waiting for relatives to turn up for the dinner.

In 1986, Pollay gives us the concept of 'distorted mirror' where advertising merely reflect those cultural values that could help sell products and ignore those that could not benefit

advertisers. This was supported by Cheng and Schweitzer (1996) who give us the concept of 'double-distorted mirror'.

Almost every image in a technologically advanced society is created for a reason, with some other or larger purpose in mind. There is, then, the surface appearance or denotative meaning of the image, but there is also a deeper, myth-like connotation as well. Hall (1996) sees representation as an act of reconstruction. For example, the image of the diners talking on their hand set reconstruct something, not merely a Chinese New Year reunion dinner.

From this study, it is obvious that consumers are aware of the commercial driven-purpose of these advertisements. Consumers are very much aware of the 'economics of advertisements', i.e. what is advertised certainly has a purpose which benefits the advertiser. In many instances, respondents take an oppositional stand to the advertising messages. They appeared to know the intention of the advertisers of "playing with their consciousness" and had thus put up their defenses.

### **About the author**

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