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POSTMODERN ADVERTISING AND ITS RECEPTION

—A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

从跨文化视角
看后现代广告及其接受

马琳/著

对外经济贸易大学出版社
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PREFACE

Postmodern advertising has become a prominent advertising form and, in recent years, it has been increasingly used by international companies to appeal to consumers in different parts of the world. However, despite its currency, extant studies on postmodern advertising are basically in an atheoretical manner; reception study is especially lacking about how postmodern advertising is actually received by consumers; and there has been almost no study about how postmodern advertising works internationally. Motivated by the gap in literature and the growing importance of international advertising markets in the globalization condition, this project is aimed to systematically study postmodern advertising and its reception internationally, particularly from a cross-cultural perspective.

The book first reviews theories of postmodernism in relation to culture, representation, aesthetics, and consumption, which lays out the theoretical framework for studying postmodern advertising. Then, by synthesizing extant studies on postmodern advertising as well as discussions on postmodern reading experience, the book discusses the major structural features of postmodern advertising, namely, appropriation, fragmentation, self-reflexivity, and spectacularity, and the nature of the reception of postmodern advertising. Next, the globalization condition—its repercussions for world culture(s) and international advertising—is reviewed, and the logic of using postmodern advertising for the international markets under globalization is then analyzed.

In the empirical research, the author investigated how postmodern advertising is actually received by international consumers. Following the interpretive advertising research paradigm, the research used projective techniques to collect data. Ten informants with high levels of cultural capital from the U.S. and China respectively participated in the project. Three postmodern advertisements for Diesel, Levi's and Benetton were used as stimuli. Applying the grounded theory, the author identified the reading strategies the informants used and the brand image connotations they formed when reading the advertisements, in relation to the four structural features of postmodern advertising and the cultural traditions of the two countries. The results of the research show that international consumers from both countries are generally receptive to postmodern advertising. There are similarities in their readings of postmodern advertisements, which reflect their shared characteristics and consumer culture under globalization. There are also major differences in their readings, which reflect persisting cultural differences between the two consumer groups. The theoretical and practical implications of the research are discussed at the end of the book.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Postmodern Advertising and the Globalization Condition

An international online Diesel advertising campaign invites consumers worldwide to join the afterlife in Diesel Heaven. The advertisement features a lady announcing an invitation for those who have followed Diesel's guide for "successful living" to continue their journey with Diesel, but this time in Heaven for successful after-living. The announcement is followed by the pearly gate of Heaven being crashed, behind which is the dreamlike, confusing world of Diesel Heaven. Several tags then appear on the screen. Clicking one tag, you could see two masculine angels fighting against each other with a cool-looking girl watching them; clicking another tag, you would find a couple arguing while an angel is hiding under a bed with his head poking out as if to check what's going on; clicking a third tag, you would see an angel who wants to hitch a ride with a girl sitting there with tons of luggage who is waiting for a ride herself; and as you continue clicking the tags, you would see more such odd pictures which seem totally irrelevant to each other.

A series of Levi's print advertisements in Australia present the body of a man cut in parts which are scattered in different places—on a bus in one advertisement and in rooms which you can't exactly tell where in the other advertisements. They all have the Levi's logo and tagline on the upper-right corner of the pictures which reads "Deconstructed." Another TV commercial for Levi's starts with three young people entering a restaurant. The scene then abruptly switches to a girl standing in front of two restrooms both marked with a rooster figure, trying to figure out which one of them is for women. It switches next to a young man clumsily knocking down plates and cups. In the scene that follows, a man drives through a car wash with his windows down, and while exiting, almost collides with a Chevy driven by a man in a cowboy hat. The Levi's logo and the tagline "They Go On" appear on the screen as the Chevy driver apologizes and moves over.

A Benetton print advertisement published exactly the same worldwide features a monk-like figure and a soldier-like figure bowing to each other both with the palms of their two hands together. In the background of the picture, there are the big black letters "VICTIMS." In the whole advertisement, you can't find any Benetton clothing, but only the tagline "United Colors of Benetton."

Nowadays, we can see a lot of advertisements like these. They lack many features of the traditional advertisements we normally come across: a persuasive and coherent argument about the product's attributes and promised benefits; a clear, intelligible, and realistic rendering of the product and its users; a comprehensible storyline and characters that the viewers can relate to and identify with. Instead, they disguise their message, with no explicit references to the product or its attributes; they break down the narrative continuity; they visually challenge the viewer through the juxtaposition of puzzling images and not-so-easily identifiable characters; they take the viewer backstage; and they generally make the advertising message more ambiguous and harder to understand.

This type of adverting is usually referred to as postmodern advertising as it employs many of the aesthetic features associated with postmodernism. Many scholars in the humanities, communications, and marketing disciplines have studied postmodern advertising. Scholars like Davidson (1992), Featherstone (1991/2007), Gitlin (1986), Goldman and Papson (1996), and Poster (1990) examined the emergence of postmodern advertising—its historical and cultural background. Other scholars such as Goldman (1992), Heiligmann (2003), Hitchon and Jura (1997), Lee (1993), Proctor, Papasolomou-Doukakis, and Proctor (2001), and Sandikci (1999) studied the aesthetic features of this special form of advertising, particularly as it is compared to traditional, informative, realistic advertising. A few other studies look into audience reception of postmodern advertising and its effect, for example, Domzal and Kernan (1993), Gabriel and Lang (1995), Morris (2005), O'Donohoe (1997, 2001), and Sandikci (1999).

The emergence of postmodern advertising is closely related to the changes in the cultural and market environment that are marked by postmodernism. On the one hand, as an art form, it is influenced by the rise of the postmodern aesthetic sensibility that became widely applied in various forms of cultural production. The postmodern aesthetic sensibility challenges the realist and modernist claims of transcendental meaning and essential truth. It rejects grand narrative of any kind, but emphasizes, instead, the indeterminacy and multiplicity of meaning. Postmodernism exhibits a cultural landscape saturated with 'simulacra' and 'hyperreality' (Baudrillard, 1983, 1988), 'spectacle' (Debord, 1970), 'pastiche' (Jameson, 1984), 'self-referential' images (Fiske, 1987), and free floating signifiers that communicate through a 'nonrepresentational mode of signification' (Poster, 1990) and in a non-linear, 'figural' fashion (Lash, 1990). The influence of postmodernism can be seen in nearly every form of cultural production in the past decades, including literature, music, painting, photography, architecture, theater, to name a few, and extends to advertising. On the other hand, as a commercial tool, postmodern advertising is a response to the changing demands of a particular market segment—the highly media-savvy, literate, and skeptical consumers who share a postmodern consumer culture (Featherstone, 1991; Gitlin, 1986). This consumer segment, particularly those that Bourdieu (1984) refers to as the 'new petit bourgeois' or 'new cultural intermediaries,' pays much attention to the symbolic aspect of consumption and is very interested in the aestheticization of everyday practices. Highly familiar with the media, this group of consumers generally has a skeptical attitude toward advertising. At the same time, theirs is a very fragmented market with the members possessing individualized tastes and demands. Postmodern advertising has been adopted, as a way of distinction from traditional advertising, to appeal to these savvy, skeptical consumers (Featherstone, 1991/2007; Goldman, 1992).

Despite the growing prominence of advertisements that apply the postmodern aesthetic sensibility, there is not an agreed-upon, specific definition of postmodern advertising. However, drawing on art, literary, and cultural theories, many scholars have discussed the features of postmodern advertising. Compared to traditional advertising based on realist or modernist representation, postmodern advertising is generally characterized by intertextuality (Hitchon & Jura, 1997; Proctor et al., 2001). Postmodern advertisements usually appropriate images, ideas, and texts from different cultural contexts. But unlike traditional advertisements which also use borrowed texts that are adapted to form a coherent, clear product message, the appropriated images, ideas, and texts in postmodern advertisements are simply juxtaposed against each other without any organizing message about the advertised product (Davidson, 1992; Hitchon & Jura, 1997; Proctor et al., 2001; Sandikci, 1999). As Gabriel and Lang (1995) point out, postmodern advertisements are filled with fragmented signifiers that collide almost coincidentally with the brands/products, with the result of multiplicity and lack of closure in ad meaning. Postmodern advertisements also typically use a mixture of forms and styles, and emphasize the visual and the spectacle in representation (Heiligmann, 2003; Lee, 1993). Compared to literature on the features of postmodern advertising, there are far fewer researches on its reception by audience. Extant studies on postmodern advertising reception, except for those by Sandikci (1999) and Lee (2000), are basically speculative in nature. Based on the special features of postmodern advertising, some scholars tend to emphasize the sensual, pleasure-seeking aspects of the postmodern advertising reading experience (e.g., Domzal & Kernan, 1993; Gabriel & Lang, 1995), while others stress the active role of the audience and the multiple possibilities of meaning production in the ad reading process (e.g., Goldman, 1992; Lee, 1993; Morris, 2005). However, evidence is badly lacking to support these arguments. More systematic empirical studies are called for to examine how postmodern advertising is actually received.

In recent years, postmodern advertising has been increasingly adopted by international companies to advertise their products in different parts of the world. In the marketing discipline, there is a major argument that, with the accelerating globalization process, there have developed consumer groups worldwide who share similar characteristics despite their different national and cultural backgrounds and thus cross-national market segmentation is possible and highly recommendable (Duncan & Ramaprasad, 1995; Ritzer, 1995; Taylor & Johnson, 2002). One consumer group—the

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