A Comparative Study of Chinese and English Advertisements from the Perspective of Visual Grammar

—Illustrated by the Cases of Cosmetics Advertising

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Abstract: Relying on multimedia networks, commercial advertisements using multi-modal discourse such as sound, image, and text can be seen everywhere, which has also become one of the important means to promote and expand the market of many cosmetics products. With the booming development of the "beauty economy" cosmetics market and the general trend of cross-border e-commerce, it is of great significance to study Chinese and English print advertisements of cosmetics. This paper uses the reproductive meaning and interactive meaning of Visual Grammar proposed by Krees & Van Leeuwen to compare the Chinese and English print advertisements of cosmetics derived randomly from official propaganda channels, which are more representative and have wider coverage and higher acceptability. Through the literature and content analysis method, some reasons for the similarities and differences of Chinese and English print ads are proposed, which provide a new guidance for the analysis and design for both Chinese and English print ads to promote communication and cooperation between different cultures.

Keywords: Visual Grammar, Chinese and English print advertisement, cosmetics

1. Introduction

The development prospect of the cosmetic economy is more and more considerable, and it has even become one of the pillar industries in our country. Therefore, it is of great significance to study the print ads of cosmetics. The study of print ads is not only the study of language but also the study of the culture behind it. The significance of this study can be roughly divided into the following three aspects: Firstly, the study of domestic and foreign cosmetics print ads through visual grammar and multi-modal discourse can not only broaden the existing research perspective but also promote the communication of different cultures and accelerate the development of the cosmetics market. Secondly, for practitioners engaged in print advertising of cosmetics, it can better attract more consumers to occupy a larger market share in the severe market competition. Finally, for consumer groups, this study can enable them to have a certain cognitive judgment on cosmetics through print ads so as to make better choices.

2.   Literature Review

Through the previous researches in China by Zhang Huali, Zhang Lu, Wang Geli, Zhang Youbin, and Zhang Xin as well as the researches outside China by Katherine Toland Frith and David Wesson, Huang Guowen and Cheong, we can draw some conclusions.

Firstly, previous advertising analysis is mostly conducted from the perspective of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and cultural value; secondly, few studies have explored the cultural reasons behind the differences between Chinese and English print advertisements; moreover, few previous studies compared Chinese and English print ads from the perspective of Visual Grammar.

3.   The Theoretical Framework

Kress & Van Leeuwen defined the reproductive meaning as "the ability of semiotic systems to represent objects and their relations in a world outside the reproductive system or in the semiotic systems of a culture". And the reproductive meaning can be divided into two categories, narrative reproductive meaning, and conceptual reproductive meaning. Typically, narrative reproductive meaning contains one or more vectors, while conceptual reproductive meaning usually contains no vectors [1]. Vectors are expressions of unfolding actions and events, processes of change, and temporal-spatial arrangements. From the broad sense, the vision of the figure in the images, a line can be called a vector.

3.1.   The Reproductive Meaning

3.1.1. Narrative Reproductive Meaning

Narrative reproductive meaning as the name suggests, is the reproduction of an event or scene with images, usually including the participants and objects of the action, connected by vectors. Narrative reproductive meaning consists of three types: action process, reaction process, verbal and mental process. The action process often has no object of action, only the actor and action. The reaction process involves the actor, the action, and the action object, connected by a vector. Whether or not there are action objects is the difference between the two. Verbal and mental processes are mainly in the form of bubble boxes or dialog boxes in images.

3.1.2. Conceptual Reproductive Meaning

Conceptual reproductive meaning expresses the structure and meaning of an image, often without the presence of a character, and concludes the process of classification, analysis, and symbolism. The classification process refers to the equal relationship between composition elements in the image and the absence of genera. For example, people can be divided into two categories: male and female. Animals can be divided into carnivores and herbivores; the analysis process refers to the generic relationship between elements in the image. The symbolic process is generally abstract and requires the viewer to think about it before he can understand it.

3.2.   The Interactive Meaning

The interactive meaning is associated with the social relationship between participants and the evaluative orientations that participants adapt to each other and towards the represented world of the text. Interactive meaning refers to the relationship among the designer of the image, the person or thing in the image, and the viewer. At the same time, it prompts the viewer's attitude towards representing, which is realized through four ways: contact, distance, perspective, and modality.

3.2.1. Contact

Contact refers to the imaginary relationship between the person or the thing in the image and the viewer established through the vision to cause the viewer to produce a certain emotional experience, which can be divided into demand image and offer image, the difference between the two images is if there is straightforward eye contact engaged. If there is, it is a demand image, if there is not, it is an offer image. The demand images ask for trust or recognition from the viewer, arouse resonance, and generate positive interaction with the viewer. Offer image is more objective. Without direct eye contact, it is usually neutral to provide some objective facts or rational advice from the perspective of a third party [2].

3.2.2. Distance

Distance refers to the distance from which people, places, and things are presented, and this dimension is concerned with different choices among close-up, medium shot, and long shot, which can reveal different relationships between the represented participants and viewers [3]. The VG divides the distance into four aspects according to the distance of the scene, which are personal close distance, personal long-distance, social close distance, and social long distance. Close-ups of individuals with only the head appearing; Individuals with long-distance appear at the waist and above; Social proximity includes the whole body of the character; Social distance involves the character's whole body and its surroundings.

3.2.3. Perspective

Perspective can be understood as the angle chosen in photography or painting, which mainly includes three categories: eye-level angle, high angle, and low angle. Eye-level angle means equal status, empathy, and integration; the high angle indicates that the figure in the image is more authoritative, giving the impression of being distant and aloof, while the low angle indicates that the figure in the image is in a weak position.

3.2.4. Modality

Modality refers to the use of means of expression in the picture, such as color, tone, detail characterization, etc. Modality reflects the degree of truth or credibility of the statement we make. Generally speaking, the higher the degree of truth and reduction of the image, the higher the modality of the image.

3.3. The Cultural Dimension

In this paper, we focus on the Hofstede Power Distance dimension to discuss the cultural reason behind the similarities and differences between the Chinese and English print ads. Power Distance expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people. People in societies exhibiting a large degree of power distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. In societies with low power distance, people strive to equalize the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power [4].

3.4. High Context and Low Context

Hall proposed that cultures can be identified based on the messages the members in a given culture prefer to use, and he defined these as high context or low context communication. Culture cannot be categorized as exclusively high context or low context, but some cultures tend to be at the higher end while others are at the lower end of the continuum [5].

4. The Comparative Study of the Chinese and English Print Ads

4.1. Meaning of Chinese and English Cosmetics Prints Ads

4.1.1. Reproductive Meaning of Chinese Cosmetics Prints Ads

As was introduced in chapter three, the author will take one Chinese print ads and one English print ads to analyze the reproductive meaning in the following passage, the first example was shown in figure 1：

Figure 1: Florasis advertisement

Figure 2: Chanel liquid foundation advertisement

From figure 1, on the right side of the picture, a Chinese woman in a typical Chinese costume is holding a lipstick and gazing affectionately at the reader. This is the reflection of the reaction process in the narrative reproductive meaning. Chinese women are the originators of the action, and the object

of the action is her lip. On the left side of the image, an open lipstick with traditional Chinese connotations is displayed on the screen, and exquisite flower and bird carvings are lifelike. These flower and bird carvings and the characteristic clothes worn by Chinese women are formal elements of Chinese ancient style, which is intended to emphasize that this lipstick combines elements of Chinese ancient style, which is also the biggest sales highlight and the embodiment of the conceptual meaning of the reproductive meaning. To conclude, this advertising concludes the two types of the reproductive meaning. Through the analysis of the reproductive meaning of 25 Chinese cosmetics print advertisements, the obtained data are shown in the following table 1:

Table 1: Distribution of Process Types in Chinese Print Cosmetic Advertisements

Process types		Quantity	Frequency	
Narrative meaning	Action process	7	17.5%	55%
	Reactional process	15	37.5%	
	Verbal and mental process	0	0%	
Conceptual meaning	Classification process	5	12.5%	45%
	Analysis process	3	7.5%	
	Symbolic process	10	25%	
Total		40		100%

The total number of process types is 40, which is inconsistent with the number of 25 ads in the sample due to the fact that some ads involve more than one process type.

4.1.2. Reproductive Meaning of English Cosmetics Prints Ads

The second example was shown in figure 2 The big picture shows the left side of a woman's face with delicate makeup, eyes looking forward. In this picture, there are only actions, but there are no objects in the distance, which belongs to the action process in the narrative reproduction. Moreover, there are water-like marks on the woman's face, which are meant to indicate that the skin will not dry out after using the product in the lower-left corner of the picture, which expresses a non-transactional reactional process.

Through the analysis of the reproductive meaning of 25 English cosmetics print advertisements, the obtained data are shown in the following table 2:

Table 2: Distribution of Process Types in English Print Cosmetic Advertisements

Process types		Quantity	Frequency	
Narrative meaning	Action process	9	17.6%	56.8%
	Reactional process	20	39.2%	
	Verbal and mental process	0	0%	
Conceptual meaning	Classification process	8	15.6%	43.2%
	Analysis process	6	11.8%	
	Symbolic process	8	15.6%	
Total		51		100%

The total number of process types is 51, which is inconsistent with the number of 25 ads in the sample due to the fact that some ads involve more than one process type.

4.1.3. The Differences and Similarities between the Chinese and English Cosmetics Print Ads in Reproductive Meaning

According to table 1 and table 2, the similarities and differences in the reproductive meaning of cosmetics in both Chinese and English print advertisements are summarized in the following table 3:

Table 3: Comparison of the Chinese and English prints ads in reproductive meaning

	Narrative meaning			Conceptual meaning		
	Action process	Reactional process	Verbal and mental process	Classification process	Analysis process	Symbolic process
Chinese	17.5%	37.5%	0%	12.5%	7.5%	25%
English	17.6%	39.2%	0%	15.6%	11.8%	15.6%

From the table 3, we can see that there are some similarities between Chinese and English print advertisements. First of all, both of them are zero in the application of the verbal and mental process. Secondly, both of them are biased towards narrative meaning than conceptual meaning. Finally, both of them use reactional process more frequently than action process.

But there are some obvious differences between the two. First of all, narrative reproductive meaning is more frequently used in English advertisements than Chinese advertisements, which pay more attention to the story in the picture and have a stronger persuasive function. Secondly, in the application of conceptual meaning, Chinese advertisements use symbolic meaning more frequently than English advertisements, and the meaning expressed in the picture is more abstract and abstruse.

4.2. The Study of the Interactive Meaning Perspective

4.2.1. Contact

From the figure 1, we can see an action originator has a direct eye contact with the imaginary viewer, which is the demand in the cont. However, in figure 2, the action originator has no direct eye contact with the imaginary viewer, which belongs to the offer in the contact. Through this method, we analyzed and summarized the 25 Chinese and 25 English print ads in contact in table 4 and table 5:

Table 4: The distribution of the Chinese Print ads in contact

	Quantity	Frequency
Demand	14	56%
offer	11	44%

Table 5: The distribution of the English Print ads in contact

	Quantity	Frequency
Demand	9	36%
offer	16	64%

4.2.2. Social Distance

As mentioned in chapter three, the social distance can be divided into 4 aspects: personal close distance, personal long-distance, social close distance, and social long distance. Through the method in chapter three, we summarized the 25 Chinese and 25 English print ads in the social distance in table 6 and table 7:

Table 6: The distribution of the Chinese Print ads in social distance

Social distance	Quantity	Frequency
Personal close distance	12	48%
Personal long distance	3	12%
Social close distance	0	0%
Social long distance	0	0%

Table 7: The distribution of the English Print ads in social distance

Social distance	Quantity	Frequency
Personal close distance	10	40%
Personal long distance	2	8%
Social close distance	2	8%
Social long distance	4	16%

4.2.3. Perspective

As mentioned in chapter three, the perspective can be divided into 3 angles: eye-level angle, low angle, and high angle. Through the method in chapter three, we summarized the 25 Chinese and 25 English print ads in perspective in table 8 and table 9:

Table 8: The distribution of the Chinese Print ads in perspective

Perspective	Quantity	Frequency
Eye-level angle	22	88%
Low angle	1	4%
High angle	2	8%

Table 9: The distribution of the English Print ads in perspective

Perspective	Quantity	Frequency
Eye-level angle	17	68%
Low angle	3	12%
High angle	5	20%

4.2.4. Modality

As mentioned in chapter three, the modality can be divided into 2 aspects: high modality and low modality. Through the method in chapter three, we summarized the 25 Chinese and 25 English print ads in the modality in table 10 and table 11:

Table 10: The distribution of the Chinese Print ads in modality

Modality	Quantity	Frequency
High modality	21	84%
Low modality	4	16%

Table 11: The distribution of the English Print ads in modality

Modality	Quantity	Frequency
High modality	17	68%
Low modality	8	32%

4.2.5. The Differences and Similarities between the Chinese and English Cosmetics Print Ads in Interactive Meaning

By integrating the above data and comprehensively comparing the similarities and differences in the interactive meaning of Chinese and English print ads, the bar chart is formed as follows:
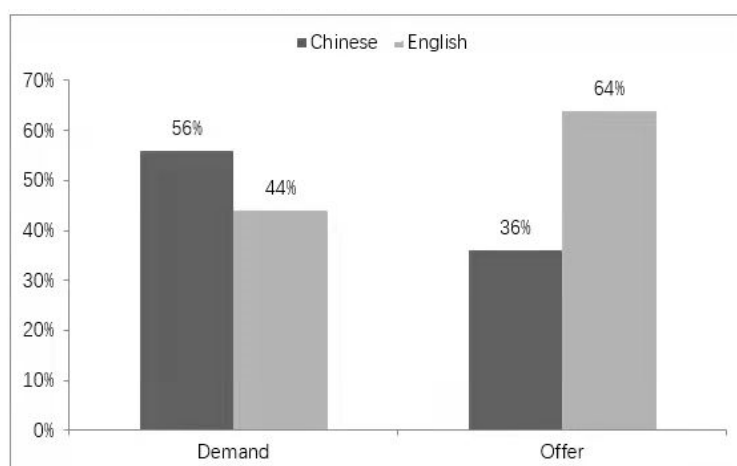

Figure 3: Comparison of the Chinese and English print ads in contact Date resource: table 4&table 5

From figure 3, Chinese advertisements prefer demand contact to provide images to customers in a persuasive-oriented way to promote transactions. However, English advertisements are more inclined to offer contact and display products more vividly in an information-oriented way.
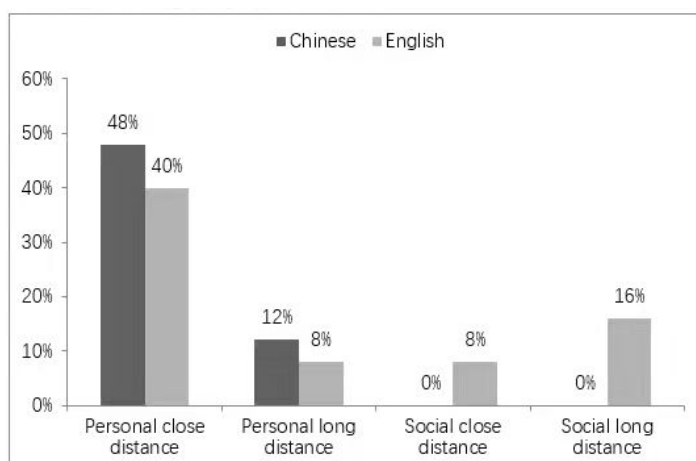

Figure 4: Comparison of the Chinese and English print ads in social distance Date resource: table 6&table 7

From figure 4, we can see that both the English and Chinese print ads designers prefer to use the personal close distance in the image to shorten the distance with the viewers. From the data collected,

English prints ads use social close and long-distance more frequently than those do in Chinese print ads.
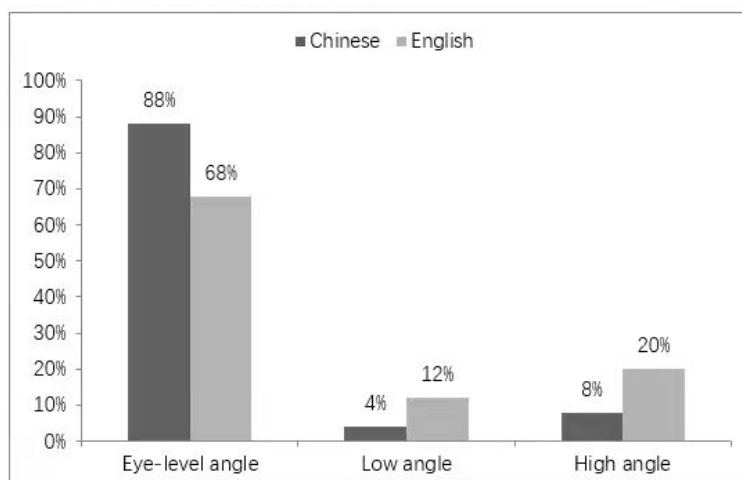

Figure 5: Comparison of the Chinese and English print ads in perspective Date resource: table 8 & table 9

From figure 5, we can see that both Chinese and English print ads are more inclined to eye-level angle, and both sides rarely use low angle. From the data collected, English print ads use high angle more frequently than Chinese print ads.
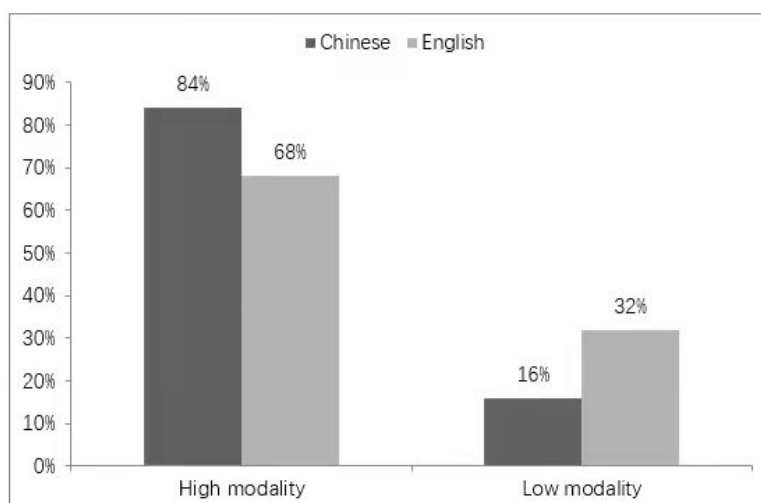

Figure 6: comparison of the Chinese and English print ads in modality Date resource: table 10 & table 11

From figure 6, we can conclude both Chinese and English print ads prefer to use a more vivid and colorful image in high modality. But the English print ads use low modality more frequently than Chinese ads.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Reasons for the Differences and Similarities between the Chinese and English Cosmetics Print Ads

It is found that there are obvious differences between Chinese and English print advertisements. First of all, the two are more inclined to the use of narrative reproductive meaning, advertising in a more vivid way. Secondly, both of them prefer the eye-level angle to shorten the distance with the viewers, to establish an inmate relationship with the imaginary viewers to persuade a purchasing action. However, Chinese advertisements tend to be more implicit and in-depth, using more symbolic meanings to give readers deep feelings, in the meantime, Chinese advertisements and authority worship make its advertisements more esoteric, while most Western countries emphasize individualism and are more likely to reflect the characteristics of equality. There are also clear differences. Chinese advertisements tend to be more implicit and in-depth, using more symbolic meanings to give readers deep feelings, while English advertisements are more direct and attract readers by telling stories. According to Hall's high context and low context, China belongs to a high context country with five thousand years of cultural precipitation. It is precisely the point that Chinese advertisements are more subtle and profound when conveying product information.

From the advertising information collected, we can know that Chinese advertisements are more inclined to star endorsement. This can be explained by the power distance in the cultural dimension. China is a country with a high power distance index, where people respect reputable brands or persons and obey the will of authorities. In such an environment, Chinese consumers will choose products with a high degree of fame when choosing cosmetics products. Once the products are covered with the power of a famous star, in the Chinese consumers' minds, it is that they are worth buying.

5.2. Suggestion

Based on the different cultural backgrounds of each country, the cosmetics print advertisement should be targeted at the market first in the design process to understand the cultural background and characteristics behind it. Advertisements that suit the cultural thinking of local people will get twice the result with half the effort.

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