The Influence of Advertising Language on Adolescents' Consumption Perspectives from the Perspective of Behavioral Economics

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Abstract: Advertising leverages linguistic concepts and metaphorical techniques to enhance the persuasiveness and expressiveness of products. In the current era of widespread electronic devices and online shopping platforms, advertising exerts an unprecedented influence on consumer behavior, particularly among adolescents at the peak of their cognitive development. Adolescents are more susceptible to the impact of advertising language due to their unique psychological characteristics. This paper combines theories such as behavioral economics and mental accounts to analyze the underlying causes of irrational consumption behavior among adolescents within the context of China's distinct mental account structure. The study aims to examine the influence of different advertising approaches on adolescents' consumption attitudes from a social-psychological perspective. Additionally, it proposes reform policy recommendations, including strengthening government regulation, enhancing educational guidance, promoting social governance, and conducting empirical research, to contribute to the creation of a civilized and harmonious developmental environment for adolescents.

1. Introduction

Adolescents are a distinct group between children and adults, possessing unique needs[1]. Scholars like Erik Erikson have emphasized that adolescents experience identity and role confusion during this developmental stage, requiring the development of their identities and self-awareness, including aspects such as gender identity, political inclinations, and religious beliefs. Concurrently, adolescents undergo rapid cognitive growth and the development of complex thinking abilities. They begin to question the beliefs inherited from previous generations and challenge social relationships[2]. Consequently, adolescents have been regarded as "miniature adults"[3].

At its core, advertising is a language-based medium. Cao Zhiyun defined advertising language as "the language used in advertisements, encompassing all linguistic and textual information found within advertisements, such as speech, words, sentences, texts, punctuation, and textual graphics"[4]. In the rapidly evolving era of the Internet and continuous innovations in television media, advertising has grown significantly and diversified across various platforms, becoming an integral part of people's lives. Presently, advertising silently influences adolescents, often yielding negative effects. Many advertisements employ metaphorical techniques to induce adolescents into engaging in irrational consumption. For instance, F. Ziesmer noted that adolescents are emerging as a valuable consumer segment due to economic recession and cultural changes[5]. Research in 2013 reported that adolescents, as the largest consumer group in the United States, contribute approximately $150 billion annually. The primary goal of this survey is to investigate how advertisement linguistics affects adolescent consumption behavior from a behavioral economics perspective. In this research, we designed a survey that embodies the questions about how often juveniles (age 17-22) consume luxury brands, how often the advertisements attract them, and to what extent they agree with the connection between advertisements and the consumption of affection[6].

In contemporary society, advertising strategies have gradually diversified. Businesses, driven by profit, tend to adopt extreme and class-oriented commercial advertising language and image designs. They highlight differences in class, race, and gender through advertising language, continuously influencing adolescents' thoughts, and lifestyles and even inducing them to adopt erroneous life values. Existing research primarily focuses on the consumer psychology of high school and college students, with limited attention given to studying NFT (Non-Fungible Token) products within the metaverse context[7]. Previous research has predominantly explored linguistic, social psychological, linguistic, and advertising psychological aspects, paying comparatively less attention to the behavioral economic theories encompassed behind advertisements[8]. Hence, this paper designed a survey that seeks to analyze the influence on adolescents' consumption attitudes from a social-psychological perspective and discuss corresponding countermeasures.
2. The Inevitability of Adolescents’ Irrational Consumption

(1) The Influence of Businesses Utilizing Digital Products and the Internet to Enhance Adolescents’ Irrational Consumption

Advertising language serves as a key means of communication in advertising, as it can evoke emotional resonance among the audience and guide their consumption behavior. Advertisers aim to induce adolescent consumers by carefully designing advertising language that associates consumer products with their emotions, familial ties, romantic relationships, and other values. Adolescents, in a special period of life development, are characterized by their inclination to think critically, quickly adapt to new things but possess weaker discernment abilities. When exposed to advertising language, they are easily influenced by various factors, such as emotional needs, social identification, and peer pressure. Under the influence of sensory impulses and emotional factors, adolescents are susceptible to losing rational analysis and making consumption decisions devoid of logical judgment, ultimately leading to irrational consumption behavior.

Over the past two years, businesses have focused on marketing non-fungible tokens (NFTs) in the non-metaverse realm. NFTs represent unique cryptographic systems that captivate adolescents, primarily due to the metadata associated with NFTs, which bestows product ownership and transaction transparency. For instance, when significant enthusiasm and buzz surrounds Alibaba's NFT product series, most consumers highly prioritize it. This indicates that companies should regularly interact with their target markets to create a community composed of potentially interested customers, a task facilitated by social media platforms. Businesses attract adolescents to join these communities through social media by sharing information, pictures, videos, lotteries, and other content related to NFT products. Subsequently, businesses interact with potential teenage customers by providing professional consultations, answering questions, collecting feedback, and engaging in other activities to continually reinforce adolescents' trust and loyalty. These efforts lead to heightened sales and promotional outcomes. For example, Gucci and the gaming platform Reblox collaborated to launch a co-branded virtual equipment collection via an electronic game social platform, offering lower prices than Gucci's physical products. Adolescents obtain virtual luxury goods through NFTs, satisfying their desires for comparison and vanity, fueling irrational consumption.

(2) The Influence of Mental Accounts on Adolescents’ Irrational Consumption

Nobel laureate Richard Thaler first introduced the mental account theory. Mental accounts are the cognitive process in which individuals mentally categorize, record, and evaluate their wealth. This process is influenced by individuals’ estimations and expectations for different accounts (Thaler, 1985) [9].

Building upon this theory, researchers such as Li Aimei and Sun Daqiang have established a unique mental account structure specific to Chinese individuals [10-11]. They have noted that Chinese mental accounts exhibit distinct cultural attributes, and advertising language, in conjunction with these cultural attributes, creates a unique mental account for Chinese consumers. The study confirms that Chinese mental accounts have three fundamental components: income, expenses, and savings. Income is further divided into regular work income, irregular additional income, and income from business investments. Expenses are categorized into essential living expenses, family development and personal growth expenses, emotional connection expenses, and leisure and entertainment expenses. Savings accounts are divided into security-oriented protection accounts and risk-oriented investment accounts.

According to Professor Li Aimei’s model, we conclude that consumers’ expenditures on luxury goods are based on their leisure and entertainment expenses. If advertisers bind advertising language with emotions such as family affection and filial piety, consumers’ mental accounts for expenditures shift from leisure and entertainment expenses to emotional connection expenses [10]. For example, the advertisement for DR diamond rings, with the language “A man can only customize one ring in his lifetime,” combines love and brand value. According to DR’s prospectus, the highest-selling FOREVER series of simple luxury items in the first half of 2021 cost approximately 4,000 yuan to produce, yet they are priced at 16,000 yuan, achieving a gross profit margin of 72.58%. In contrast, other domestic jewelry giants such as Zhou Dasheng and IDO have an average gross profit margin of around 40%. Behind the high cost and low profit is the reduced price sensitivity of consumers when it comes to symbols of love. Couples perceive that they are paying for love. These studies reveal the correlation between consumers' mental accounts and irrational consumption.

Swatch, a world-renowned fashion watch brand, captures the emotional spending of the adolescent demographic by infusing fashion with the concept of meeting personalized requirements. Swatch conveys the artistic charm of individuality, youthfulness, and excitement to teenagers. Due to characteristics such as a younger age structure, lower cultural literacy, weaker defense mechanisms, and a strong desire for comparison, adolescents are easily influenced by the "non-substitutability" effect. This effect states that wealth belonging to different accounts cannot be completely substituted for one another. Adolescents pursue the maximization of emotional satisfaction, leading to a cognitive illusion that emotional connection expenses are not luxury expenses. Consequently, numerous irrational consumption decisions are made. (see Table 1)
(3) The Influence of Celebrity Endorsements on Adolescents' Irrational Consumption

Adolescents are known for their self-expression, rebellious nature, and pursuit of fashion and trends. Therefore, celebrity culture is one of the most admired cultures among adolescents. Commercial companies utilize celebrity endorsements not only to enhance brand awareness but also to project the positioning of products in the market, target audience, and brand values. Celebrity endorsers have a dual nature, and the replacement of untrustworthy endorsers can have an impact on the brand image, leading to changes in adolescents' perception and trust in the brand, thereby influencing their consumption decisions. Therefore, when selecting endorsers, businesses often invest time in assessing whether the endorsers' image and reputation align with the brand's image and values to avoid negative effects resulting from endorser replacements.

At this point, celebrities possess unique charm and leadership that give rise to the so-called "halo effect"[12]. When they serve as endorsers, the intangible halo effect is transferred to the products they endorse, imbuing the products with a halo as well. Businesses leverage the celebrity effect to establish a connection between adolescents and the endorsed products based on the celebrities' image and values. Subtly and unconsciously, this stimulates their desire to purchase the products, making them consumers of the endorsed brands. For example, luxury brand Dior chose celebrity Liu Yifei as its ambassador because she embodies the brand's core values of "continuously pursuing excellence, exuding feminine charm, and being refined and elegant." This choice targets adolescents who identify with Liu Yifei's values but may still have immature thinking, thereby leading to irrational consumption.

It is important for adolescents and their parents to develop media literacy and critical thinking skills to discern the intentions behind celebrity endorsements and make informed consumption choices. Additionally, businesses should take ethical considerations into account when selecting celebrity endorsers, ensuring that their values align with the brand's values and that they serve as positive role models for adolescents. By promoting responsible and transparent marketing practices, the influence of celebrity endorsements on adolescents' irrational consumption can be minimized.


This questionnaire aims to investigate the luxury consumption behavior among Chinese youth aged 14 to 22 years old. A total of 86 participants from junior high schools, high schools, and universities in Shanghai participated in the survey. The data revealed that 88.37% of respondents have either shown interest in or purchased luxury products. In the context of luxury advertisements pervading social media and the internet (100% of respondents agreed that luxury advertisements often highlight the brand as the ultimate choice for specific groups (e.g., actors). Moreover, all respondents (100%) agreed that luxury advertisements associate the brand with social class or specific emotions (e.g., love, filial piety), and 55.26% of survey participants admitted that they consume luxury products to highlight their own social status, while 76.32% of respondents revealed that they buy luxury products for their relatives due to the influence of advertisements. In conclusion, luxury product advertisements utilizing celebrity endorsements and associating the brand with social class or specific emotions have led to irrational consumption behaviors among a significant portion of Chinese youth.
4. Policy Recommendations from the Perspective of Behavioral Economics

In order to address the issue of excessive consumption among adolescents influenced by advertising, this paper proposes the following policy recommendations from the perspective of behavioral economics:

(1) Establish regulations and strengthen supervision

In response to emerging areas such as the digital economy, it is important to improve relevant laws and regulations on advertising supervision, promote the issuance of departmental regulations, and encourage local legislation. Establish a regular inspection mechanism for advertising supervision and increase efforts to investigate and penalize illegal activities such as the dissemination of false information. Further urge online platforms to fulfill their responsibilities and ensure the authenticity and reliability of product information through careful review and verification.

(2) Strengthen education and provide positive guidance

Promote the inclusion of financial literacy education in the school curriculum, improve the interactive education mechanism between schools and families, and guide adolescents in establishing sound psychological accounts and understanding basic financial knowledge and money management skills. Simultaneously, enhance critical thinking skills and logical reasoning abilities through general education, helping adolescents better cope with the advertising and temptations of businesses.

(3) Social governance and create a conducive environment

Utilize various channels such as the internet, television, radio, and live events to intensify the promotion of rational and moderate consumption. Guide adolescents to develop proper consumption values, establish good consumption habits, and assist them in distinguishing between genuine needs and excessive consumption. Additionally, help them understand that consumption is not the sole means of satisfying their needs and encourage the pursuit of meaningful values.

(4) Conduct empirical research and strengthen the foundation

Conduct in-depth analysis of the psychological account structure of Chinese consumers and its impact on consumption behavior. This research serves as a theoretical basis and research foundation for government policy formulation, as well as aids businesses in accurately identifying target consumer groups and developing more effective marketing strategies.

In conclusion, by strengthening government supervision, creating a favorable environment, raising consumer awareness, and conducting further research, we can ultimately achieve the goal of regulating market order, protecting the healthy development of adolescents, and safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of consumers.

References