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**The Role of Media**

**in Attention Economies**

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**Abstract**

This project focuses on how the three factors of celebrities, memory and social media platform attract people’s attention and promote consumption. In order to prove and modify our initial conjecture and analysis, the project uses three methods of interview, observation and textual analysis. This topic is significant, which could help advertisers and product manufacturers adjust their marketing strategies rationally by using celebrities and other elements.

**Keywords**

Celebrities, Advertising, Memory, Social media platform, Attention

**Introduction**

Kendall Jenner, an extremely famous American model, who has more than 90 million followers on Instagram. Many famous top brands invited her to spot catwalks in the fashion week, such as Chanel, FENDI and Marc Jacobs. For those brands, in view of she has numerous fans, it is worthwhile for the promotion of their products through the advertisements endorsed by her, which can be deemed as the process of attention acquisition. For her fans, their feelings for Jenner will begin to have a close relationship with the brand, which may lead to their consuming behaviors.

According to the case of Jenner, there is no doubt that we are currently living under an era of “Attention Economy”. Zulli (2017) points out that a large number of scholars have been discussing the value of audience attention and commercialization under the new media environment for a long time, but most of them believe that attention is one of the most valuable resources in contemporary capitalism. Thus, people’s attention has already become a valuable and tradable commodity in the current fast-flowing society (Law, 2011). Many scholars are aware of the impact of the current “attention economy” on the Internet (García-Rapp, 2017). Under the context of information era, our project aims to focus on the role of media in the attention economies.

As an essential part of the media, advertising plays a critical role in raising people’s attention. This paper discusses how advertisements use celebrities, memory and social media to attract people’s attention and turn their attention to consumption behavior. In order to obtain more accurate results, we controlled the variables and selected two different types of advertisements from the same brand for analysis. The first type is celebrity-based advertising, while another is content-based advertising. We took the form of a combination of observation and textual analysis to carefully observe the interviewees’ words and deeds for detailed analysis.

In the context of the above, this paper will first describe the framework for understanding the role of advertisements in attention economies. And in the following two sections, we will focus on three different research methods of the project and analyze the content of the five interviews respectively. Finally, we will compare predictive analysis with actual analysis, as well as propose shortcomings and future research directions.

**Conceptual framework**

Figure 1 below describes the framework for understanding the role of media—advertising and social media in attention economies. The framework illustrates how celebrities, memory and social media platforms help advertisements catch the audience’s attention and impact on economies and depicts the interplays of celebrities, social media and memory through advertisements. Traditional media advertisers followed a model called AIDA--Attention, Interest, Desire and Action (Goldman, 1909). In this model, attention is a major and the first stage of attracting potential consumers. Thus, advertisements can affect consumer behavior by raising the audience’s attention.

Meanwhile, these three factors--memory, celebrity and social media play significant roles in raising the attention and stimulating consumer behavior when the audience watch the advertisement. There are two types of memory which are helpful to consumer behavior. The first type is the semantic memory, which means a more structured record of facts, meanings, concepts and knowledge that come from contextual memory. Another type called implicit memory is also valuable for the brand preference which is created by unconscious associations that can continue to influence the audience later life (Brandt, 2017). The second factor, celebrity, is believed to catch the audience’s attention, make the ad memorable and acceptable and desirable based on its credibility and attractiveness (Spielman, 1981). Also, celebrity can deliver their image value to advertisements and products (O’Mahony & Meenaghan, 1998). So, the celebrity could impact on the receptivity of the message and attitudes toward the brand or product. In this way, the possibility of consumer behavior becomes larger. For using celebrities in advertisements, there are three theoretical models: congruence model (Kamins & Gupta, 1994), attractive model (Kelman, 1961) and meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989). The last factor, social media, can help to achieve online attention by ‘high visibility’ (Alice Marwick, 2013), which contribute to advertisements more and more with each click and view. For instance, on Wechat, the attention is raised by taking the form of views, comments, and subscriptions.

Not only do memory, celebrity and social media raise attention respectively, but they combine with each other to make a difference. Nowadays, using popular idols to endorse brand and products is very popular due to the synergistic effect of celebrity and memory. These popular idols can act as aids to recall the memory of the advertisements (Friedman and Friedman, 1979) and vivid advertising memory is a key to convert the non-consumer to the real consumer. Moreover, celebrity also uses social media to influence and persuade the audience to consume. The ‘ability to command an audience’ of social media (Alice Marwick, 2013) and the attractiveness of celebrity contribute together to create an online persona, or self-brand (García-Rapp, 2017). In other words, celebrities are recognized as opinion leaders or reference group effectively with the help of social media.

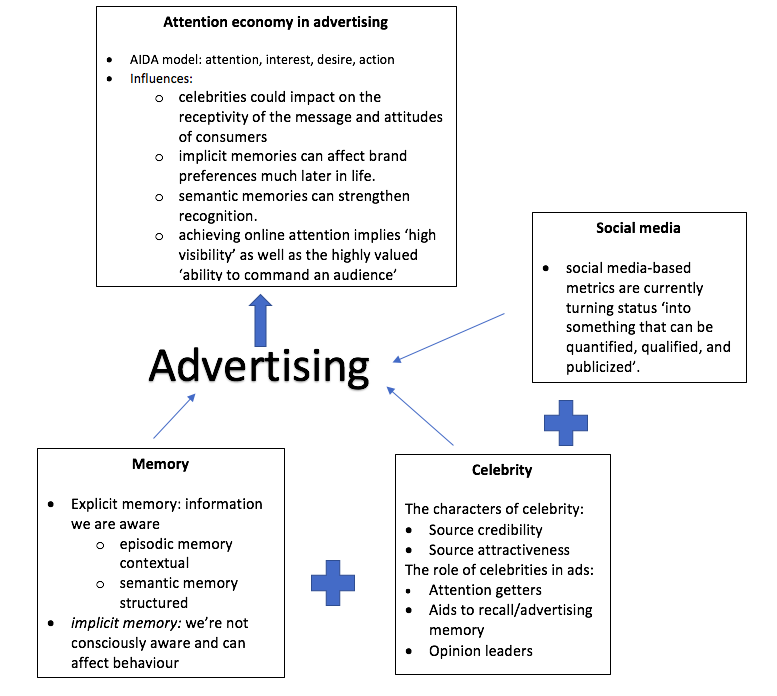


Figure 1

**Methods**

After conducting an extensive conceptual framework on the role of media in attention economies, this study carried out a small-scale interview. Combined with the method of observation and textual analysis, interviewers use one-on-one conversation with interviewees in the form of face-to-face to observe their reactions and responses.

Sample

There are five Chinese people as interviewees, including two boys and three girls. The statistic characteristics of participants in the study were as follows:

•Age: 20-26 years

•Occupation: Students

•Had/Hadn’t the experience of chasing celebrities.

•Using social media in daily lives.

Procedure

The interviewers found participants through personal contact. To respect every participant, interviewers gave them a choice whether to join in or not, as well as ensure confidentiality of their information. The interview of each person was half an hour long. These interviewees were required to answer the questions along the following lines:

•Celebrity affection

How advertisements catch audiences’ attention by using celebrities in the context of China?

•Advertising and social platform

What kind of role do advertisements play in raising the attention of their audiences and promoting consumer behavior?

Many detailed questions about the topic are extended and were utilized by specific investigation of research. The process of discussions was audiotaped and translated, and then the statistics were analyzed based on the arranged study outline.

We analyzed the first question through interviewees’ attitudes about their idols, which related to their consumption. For example, some questions like will you have the desire to buy something which is not useful but only endorsed by your idol? After that, we show them two advertisements in the same brand (M&M’s), one of which is endorsed by a star (a famous Chinese singer) and another is a creative one (focus on its content), expecting to discover the attractive elements (celebrities or creative contents) for them. Several questions such as what are the most impressive points of the two advertisements in your mind, whether you will share advertisements you like with others on platforms?

The method of observation was utilized by this interview, which can be defined as ‘a unique method for investigating the enormously complex and diverse experiences, thoughts, feelings, and activities of human beings’ (Jorgensen, 1989). It refers to the researchers interacts with people when they collect information, which is a direct approach to collecting data and information, best for the study of human behavior in particular (Singh, 2010). Therefore, we were observing our interviews from following aspects, covering their physical and mental activities. Generally speaking, observation The reason we use observation is that it is easy for interviewers to read participants’ feelings through their eyes, facial expressions, or subtle movements, then make an in-depth analysis of our study. For instance, some of the interviewee's smiles, laughing, gestures’ change or direct answer without hesitation, which implies they may be interested in the specific topic or advertisement or affirm their thoughts. Some of them present confused expressions, which indicates they may hold opposite attitudes or difficult to make a decision. Considering of this, it not only helps interviewers in understanding their verbal responses more efficiently but also contributes to the comprehending of their micro-expression.

These methods are suitable for interviewers to get into the more in-depth topic and acquire more detailed information because specific problems and abstract factors (such as feelings, attitudes and judgements) can be evaluated through it easily. Meanwhile, they are more controllable and feasible for our students to practice in this qualitative research.

In addition, we use the method of textual analysis in our further investigation. Some theories (that we mentioned in last past of this paper) were applied and illustrated, especially about celebrities, memory, social media platforms, attention economies, etc., for demonstrating how the attention of people transform to action through their recognition as well as the function media play in this process. The advantage of this method is that it lays the foundation for our research as well as form a logical framework. When it comes to the analysis in the later report, it is necessary to offer theory support for our conclusion.

In fact, we concentrate on the interactive effects of these methods, which contains a kind of rationality. Although our research cannot guarantee absolute objectivity (which we always pursuit as well), the subjective truth is also valuable for our study. Besides, with several considerations in minds, we focus more on the way they discuss rather than only what they talk. Because it is an interview that interviewees tell not merely about the content itself, but how they say to their opinions and how interviewers feel when they describe their opinions, which is deeply embedded in social research. To some extent, the respective function of these methods together with their interactivities, leading to applicable reasons we use them, not only adapt to the effective implementation of research but also ensure relative realness.

**Analysis**

In this interview, respondents are all Chinese college student; they give different physical reactions to advertisements, and each of them has different attitudes about advertising. Bingying Xu paid attention mostly to advertisements with interesting and creative content. When she has watched the ad of M&M’s with the celebrity (Eason Chan), she was calm, and after watching the one without stars, she laughed out and commented that the dialogue was funny. For Zhuoyin Li, the second advertisement (exciting and dramatic one) seemed to attract him more, which can be exemplified by his involuntarily laugh and upright postures. Another respondent Kaiwei Yu paid almost the same degree of attention to both commercials with smiling during the watch process, and he said that it is hard to compare which one was more creative. In contrast, Tianjiao Li carefully watched the two advertisements but was not interested in both ads and expressed a puzzled expression when viewing the second advertisement, because she could not understand what it wanted to convey. Finally, she preferred the first advertisement could be more attractive for her because she thought the actor in the second one looks ugly. And Jiajia Wang did not have apparent facial expressions or other physical reactions when watching commercials, but when asked which is the partial advertisements he chose the first one without hesitation and thoroughly explained his reasons: this advertisement is easier to understand and the dialogue and celebrities inside left him with a more in-depth impression.

In fact, all interviewees have their unique memory of advertisements after watching the commercials; the celebrities, plots, and actors’ lines are the most concerned parts for them. They can all notice and remember the superstar in the ad, and when the advertisement lacks this point, the exciting plot would be the most eye-catching point. Although celebrities are so influential and all respondents also have their favorite stars, this does not mean that stars can significantly influence their consumer behavior. Kaiwei Yu and Tianjiao Li have idols they love, and they claim that they are crazy for their idols, but that doesn’t mean that they will buy all the products what their icons endorse. Tianjiao Li inclined to choose the product which her idol has endorsed when comparing the same type products. She is willing to buy cheap products without hesitation, such as snacks and toothpaste, but she will not buy cars which also endorsed by her idols since she cannot afford it. Kaiwei Yu said that he would be sensible when purchasing goods, and he will focus more on the product itself than the spokesperson of the product. For Zhuoyin Li, Jiajia Wang and Bingying Xu, advertisements of celebrity endorsements have less impact on their consumption: they will not buy things they do not need just for their favorite celebrities. Celebrities do encourage them to pay more attention to those products what celebrities endorsed, but when they consider whether to pay for these things, the product itself is the only element of their decision.

Also, every interviewee agrees that they prefer to view no advertisements on social media, but social media platforms are still playing an important role for the advertiser to gain viewers’ attention. Zhuoyin Li expressed strong resentment against advertising on social media platforms, like WeChat, Facebook, and Instagram. He believes that he uses such software to communicate with his friends, then, the content in the software is related to his life and belongs to his private space. Therefore, he will directly ignore the advertisements that appear on social software, and it is even less likely to share ads with friends. At the same time, he believes that it is reasonable for advertisements to appear in other places, such as video sites; he even read those advertisements carefully and buys their products later. Similarly, Tianjiao Li also does not like advertising on social networking sites. She will deliberately choose to use social software which with less advertisement, and will not look at advertising on the software or share advert with friends unless that advertisement has her idol, and he looks charming in the ad. For Kaiwei Yu, he does not like view advertisements on social media, but he will share interesting advertisement matter and open the ad shared by his intimate friends through social media platforms. In contrast, Jiajia Wang and Bingying Xu have a more moderate attitude toward advertising. They also directly ignore advertisements on social media, but when the ad is about the products they are interested in, they may be concerned about these advertisements and share them with their friends. Bingying Xu bought Dior’s lipstick for advertising on WeChat and distributed the lipstick advertisement to her female friends, and Jiajia Wang cannot stop to view every ad about men’s shoes.

**Discussion**

Results from the five interviewers follow the conceptual framework, as presented earlier. Memory, celebrity and social media have been found having positive impacts on raising participants’ attention in advertisements, while their consuming behavior was not influenced to a large extent by advertisements which have already caught the attention of the participants. Thus, attention as the first stage of AIDA contributes to economies indirectly.

In general, the impact of celebrity endorsement is moderate on raising attention for these five interviewees. Two of them had a deep impression of the first advertisement (celebrity); two of them preferred the second advertisement due to the creative content; another one was impressed by the both. For those whose attention has already been raised by ads whether celebrity endorsed or not, these participants were able to recognize the product easily. After a period, they might buy the product if they were interested or saw the product around them when they selected goods, which proves the impact of advertising memory is quite positive on consumer behavior as long as the price of the product is acceptable. As for social media, it seems workable, even though not a perfect way to raise the attention by advertising on social media platforms because it can easily make two of them annoyed when advertisements showed suddenly in front of them. They felt uncomfortable because they were interrupted by precipitate advertisements. However, for the other three, they only watched ads which presented the brand or the type of products they were interested. Thus, it will be more effective for advertisers and product manufacturers when their advertisements were put in public according to the user’s personal preference of products by tracking user’s searching history online. Also, consumer behavior largely depends more on the product itself rather than celebrity endorsement, though celebrity plays a significant role in forming the semantic memory or implicit memory.

Before research, we initially thought celebrities themselves, as well-known characters, can immediately capture the attention of the public when they appear in advertisements and eventually turned their attention to the ad itself. Because compared to boring advertisements or sudden emergence creative advertisements, advertisements containing celebrities already have a specific audience base (i.e., fans of stars). Even so, we did not believe that celebrity influence on viewers would be the only factor in the purchase behavior. In fact, the interviewees confirmed: even if some of them have the highest level of affection for their favorite idols, their top priority is the practicality of the product itself when purchasing idol endorsements. But contrary to our previous predictions, respondents were not satisfied with advertisements appearing on social media. All respondents cared about the privacy since they tread their social accounts as a platform for personal information sharing, so some people are repellent to advertisements appearing on social platforms. Therefore, if the brand and product manufacturer wants to attract audience in social media, they need more advanced advertising skills, such as targeting users for accurate advertising, which can both avert user aversion and improve advertising effectiveness.

Referring to the evaluation of our methodology, face-to-face interviews are characterized by synchronous communication in time and place, which create an opportunity for our observation. Several social cues (e.g. body language) can be interpreted in this process. However, their value depends on what interviewer wants to know from the interviewees. This situation implies that those participants may answer the information they received with a specific direction, which can be regarded as a kind of disturbing interviewer effect. Interviewers’ personal guidance should be avoided as for as possible, even though for the need of study. This disadvantage also can be diminished by utilising an interview protocol or by the consciousness of the interviewer of this effect (Opdenakke, 2006).

In the previous phase of the study, we did interviews and detailed analysis of the content and methods but did not focus on how advertisers kept consumers’ attention. People’s attention is limited and easily transferred, especially in the context of this information era. As Styles (2005) said, attention selection is necessary since the remaining processing system cannot handle all of the stimulus input or all of the response output at the same time. Therefore, how to maintain attention should be worthy of further study and concern.

In conclusion, attracting people’s attention tends to create business value and gain economic benefits. And memory, celebrities and social media platform all play the essential role in raising people’s attention. To be specific, through our research, the celebrity is the primary factor to attract consumer’s attention, and advertising memory provides a potential impact on consumer behavior. Meanwhile, the social media platform are able to provide high visibility for brands and have the ability to persuade the audience to consume.

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