Desire on Fire: a Naturalistic Inquiry of Chinese Death Ritual Consumption

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Taking a naturalistic approach, we examined Chinese death ritual consumption. In contemporary China, burning paper replicas of consumer products, ranging from everyday items to luxury goods, has regained popularity with the ascending consumerism in society. It is believed by many Chinese consumers that after burning them, the paper goods could be received and enjoyed by the deceased in the otherworld. Chinese death ritual provides a unique context to explore important theoretical issues regarding the expansion of global consumerism and its impact on society. We also provided evidence that both supported and challenged previous theories of consumer desire, gift-giving, and conspicuous consumption.

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In this exploratory study, we took a naturalistic approach and examined Chinese death ritual consumption. In contemporary China, burning paper replicas of consumer products, ranging from everyday items to luxury goods, has regained popularity with the ascending consumerism in society. It is believed by many Chinese consumers that after burning them, the paper goods could be received and enjoyed by the deceased in the otherworld. Chinese death ritual provides a unique context to explore important theoretical issues regarding the expansion of global consumerism and its impact on society. We also provided evidence that both supported and challenged previous theories of consumer desire, gift-giving, and conspicuous consumption.

A Hedonic/Utilitarian Dual Mediation Hypothesis in the Measurement of Website Communication Effectiveness
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The Internet has become one of the hottest areas in advertising and communication research (Chung and Zhao 2004). Websites represent the more durable and common communication activity carried out by companies on the Internet (Bart et al. 2005, Karson and Korganondar 2001). This paper aims at contributing to a better understanding of the factors that determine website effectiveness as a communication tool. We develop a model which incorporates consumers’ cognitive and emotional responses simultaneously in the attitude formation process.

MacKenzie et al. (1986) showed that the Dual Mediation Hypothesis (DMH), the most widely accepted model of advertising effects, best explained the relationships among attitudes and purchase intention in the advertising communication process. According to recent literature, we can apply conventional proposals to websites by substituting websites for ads in traditional models (Karson and Fisher 2005).

Persuasion research has been dominated by the cognitive approach (Morris et al. 2002). Nevertheless, finding ways and means to incorporate emotional experience into consumer and market research has been an ongoing challenge for a long time (Allen et al. 2005). Research has studied consumers’ emotional responses to advertisements extensively (Burke and Edell 1989), and has found that emotions can affect attitude towards the brand and attitude towards the ad significantly (Kempf and Smith 1998). Recently, Allen et al. (2005) demonstrated that emotional information may serve as a separate antecedent of attitude. That means that emotional reports will add to traditional cognitive information in explaining attitude’s variance. In fact, it seems clear that if we are to fully comprehend what factors attitude depends on, we must ask consumers to report not only their cognitive states, but also their emotional experiences.

Voss et al. (2003) have developed a valid, reliable, and generalizable scale to measure the hedonic and utilitarian dimensions of consumers’ attitude. They integrate their scale in the context of the Dual Mediation Hypothesis (DMH) but restricting the scope of the study to the central route of processing. This model misses the holistic focus necessary for understanding the communication process and, moreover, cognitive and emotional elaboration is not measured directly but by involving a proxy. In this research, we aim at overcoming such weaknesses by testing a hedonic/utilitarian DMH model of communication effectiveness. This model, based on DMH, uses emotional and cognitive responses as antecedents of hedonic and utilitarian dimensions of attitude, respectively, both towards the website and the product displayed in the website. We also compare our conceptual model with the three other alternatives for which MacKenzie et al. (1986) found support: the Affect Transfer Hypothesis, the Reciprocal Mediation Hypothesis and the Independent Influences Hypotheses. What is more, we check whether the extension proposed by Karson and Fisher (2005), in which a path between attitude towards the website and attitude towards the product is introduced, fits our data better than the DMH.

We are currently collecting the data. We use holiday travel bookings through a real website as the stimulus. On arrival at the computer laboratory, subjects are informed about the procedure. First, some control variables are measured. Second, subjects visit the specified real website and interact with it. They are instructed to book a holiday package to London for the last weekend of February. Then, participants write down all the thoughts that come to their minds while they were on the website (MacKenzie et al. 1986; Sicilia et al. 2005), as well as all the feelings and emotions they experience during exposure (Coulter 1998). Finally, subjects report their hedonic and utilitarian dimensions of attitude towards the website and towards the product using the HED/UT scale (Voss et al. 2003), as well as their purchase intention (Zhang 1996). Three independent judges unfamiliar with the study objectives will code and classify the cognitive and emotional responses as positive, negative or neutral. Structural equations modeling will be used to test the theoretical model.

Our study provides insights into the simultaneous influence of both emotional and cognitive responses. This way, the cognitive paradigm in communication effectiveness models is overcome (Allen et al. 2005; Morris et al. 2002) by validating a hedonic/utilitarian DMH model. Another contribution concerns the link between consumer’s thoughts and the utilitarian dimension of attitude, as well as between consumer’s emotions and the hedonic dimension of attitude in the virtual environment. These relationships have been theoretically stated but not empirically tested. An additional contribution involves the measurement of emotions following a protocol similar to that used for thoughts. Finally, these results involve important implications for marketers. They can assess more concisely their websites’ communication effectiveness. As long as they identify what kind of responses their consumers generate, they can get clues about