"Elite Ladder" vs. "Universal Inclusion": A Comparative Study of Educational Values and Ideal Childhood Construction Reflected in Chinese and British Digital Education Advertisements

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Abstract. In the digital age, educational advertising has transcended its commercial function to become a significant medium for transmitting socio-cultural values and participating in the construction of the paradigm of "ideal childhood." This study employs a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) approach, selecting representative digital education brand advertisements from China (e.g.Yuanfudao, Zuoyebang) and the UK (e.g.Atom Learning, BBC Bitesize) as cases to meticulously analyze their narrative frameworks, visual symbols, and emotional appeals. The analysis reveals that Chinese advertisements tend to construct an imagery of childhood under "competitive collectivism," reflecting values of education as a key tool for social mobility by emphasizing efficiency, discipline, and academic achievement. British advertisements, however, exhibit a "stratified-guidance" characteristic, with narratives coexisting between the "ambition" orientation of elite education and the "fun" orientation of inclusive education, mirroring the dual-track tradition of its education system and liberal ideals. This research unveils the deeper function of digital education advertisements as a cultural "prism," provides practical insights for the cross-cultural communication of educational brands in a globalized context, and sparks societal reflection on how digital media shapes educational perceptions among youth worldwide.

Keywords: Digital Education Advertising; Cross-Cultural Comparison; Educational Values; Childhood Construction; Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

1. Introduction

In the wave of global digital transformation, educational technology (EdTech) is rapidly developing, and digital education products have become an important component of global families and education systems. The marketing strategies of these products, especially their advertising communication, not only aim to promote services, but also invisibly convey specific educational concepts, social expectations, and cultural values, participating in the social construction of what constitutes an "ideal childhood" and "successful education"[1]. Both China and the UK have large and mature digital education markets, but their distinct historical traditions, social structures, and education systems provide excellent comparative samples for observing the cross interaction of digital media, education, and cultural values.

Chinese education has long been regarded as the "key ladder" for individuals and families to achieve upward social mobility[2]. Under the background of the "double reduction" policy, the K12 subject training market has undergone restructuring, and although the marketing narrative of the digital education industry has been adjusted, deep-seated educational anxiety and competitive logic still exist. The UK is renowned for its long-standing elite education tradition, such as the public school system, and its emphasis on inclusive public education. The influence of class and cultural capital in the education path is profound[3], and the issue of social mobility is also a focus of public discussion.

In this context, the aim of this study is to explore a core issue: how digital education brand advertisements in China and the UK reflect vastly different "educational values" and construct different "ideal childhood" paradigms through their narrative strategies, visual symbols, and emotional appeals? The significance of this study lies in: firstly, deepening the understanding of advertising as a cultural practice and ideological career from the perspective of communication theory, transcending its commercial tool attributes. Secondly, from a practical perspective, clear cross-cultural comparisons can provide reference for the localization communication strategy of digital

education brands in the global market. Finally, from a societal perspective, it triggers critical reflection on how digital media shapes educational concepts and childhood culture on a global scale.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Global Media Communication and Cross-Cultural Theory

This study is grounded in cross-cultural communication research. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory provides a classic framework for understanding Sino-British cultural differences [4]. China typically scores high on dimensions such as high-power distance, collectivism, and long-term orientation, manifested in respect for authority, emphasis on collective goals, and sustained investment in future returns (e. g. educational investment). The UK exhibits relatively lower power distance, higher individualism, and a tendency towards short-term orientation and indulgence, emphasizing personal autonomy, self-fulfillment, and immediate gratification. Critical cross-cultural communication research further cautions against the trap of cultural essentialism, urging attention to how media texts dynamically represent and reconstruct cultural differences within the tension of globalization and localization [5].

2.2. Advertising Studies and Semiotics

Advertising is an arena of meaning. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory reveals how advertisements use visual and verbal symbols to create a "mythological" connection between cultural values and commodities [6]. Brand storytelling weaves narratives not only about product functions but also about ideal lifestyles, social identities, and paths to success [7]. Value-based marketing achieves effective persuasion by tapping into the audience's deep-seated emotions and beliefs. Multimodal analysis of advertisements, which involves comprehensively interpreting various semiotic resources such as text, image, and sound, is a key method for decoding their implicit values [8].

2.3. Sociology of Education

Theories from the sociology of education provide perspectives for examining the social functions of educational advertising. Bourdieu's "cultural capital" theory posits that education is a crucial mechanism for class reproduction, whereby the advantaged class maintains its status by transmitting its cultural capital to the next generation. This helps understand the possible implicit class symbols and distinctions of taste in advertisements. Furthermore, "childhood" is not a pure biological stage but a social construction [9]. Different socio-cultures define different models of "ideal childhood" (e.g., academic-centric vs. play-centric), and media, including advertising, play a central role in this construction process.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Case Selection

To ensure representativeness and comparability, this study selects well-known digital education brands targeting the K12 stage (basic education) and their advertisements from the Chinese and British markets as analysis objects.

3.1.1. Chinese Cases:

"Yuanfudao" and "Zuoyebang" were selected. Both are leading platforms in China's K12 online education sector. Their advertising strategies have changed significantly before and after the "Double Reduction" policy but still effectively reflect the mainstream narratives of the current market. Their advertisement samples were primarily collected from mainstream Chinese social platforms such as Douyin, WeChat Moments, and Bilibili.

3.1.2. British Cases:

"Atom Learning" and "BBC Bitesize" were selected. The former is an online platform focused on preparation for the 11+ (secondary school entrance exam) and GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), representing an elite exam-prep orientation. The latter is a free online learning resource platform provided by the British Broadcasting Corporation, representing a public service, inclusive orientation. Their advertisement samples were primarily collected from international platforms like YouTube and Instagram.

3.2. Research Method

This study employs Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) as the core research method. MCDA aims to reveal how language and other semiotic modes (e.g., image, sound, layout) collectively construct meaning, identity, and ideology within a socio-cultural context, and to critically examine the power relations within them.

The specific analytical framework revolves around the following four dimensions:

3.2.1. Narrative Framework:

Whose story does the advertisement tell (the protagonist is the child, parent, or teacher)? What is its core conflict or challenge (e.g., racing against time, coping with exam pressure, exploring the unknown)? What is the solution?

3.2.2. Visual Symbols:

Analyze the symbolic meaning carried by visual elements such as settings (classroom, home, outdoors), character images (clothing, expressions, actions), and props (books, electronic devices, trophies, clocks).

3.2.3. Emotional Appeal:

What emotion does the advertisement primarily attempt to evoke in the audience? Is it anxiety, urgency, competitive spirit, or curiosity, confidence, pleasure?

3.2.4. Value Proposition:

What is the core value ultimately promised by the advertisement to the user? Is it improved exam scores, admission to prestigious schools, or the joy of learning, developing comprehensive abilities, or achieving personal growth?

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Chinese Advertisements: Constructing Childhood under "Competitive Collectivism"

The analysis of Chinese cases reveals a highly consistent pattern of childhood construction emphasizing competition and collective achievement.

4.1.1. Framework:

Narratives often revolve around "winning at the starting line," "solving difficult problems," and "surpassing peers." Children are often portrayed as heroes who stand out in the collective through hard work and technological empowerment, while parents often appear as anxious observers or invested supporters. The core tension lies between limited high-quality educational resources and unlimited desire for competition.

4.1.2. Symbols:

Visual symbols are highly characteristic: close-up shots of children's focused expressions while studying diligently, animated special effects of problems being solved rapidly on screens, numbers and trophies symbolizing rankings, and the imagery of ticking clocks collectively create a sense of

time urgency and competitive atmosphere. The learning environment is mostly tidy but enclosed indoor spaces.

4.1.3. Emotional Appeal:

The primary strategy is to associate with and alleviate the widespread educational anxiety among Chinese parents. Advertisements promise to make the educational process measurable and controllable through intelligent technology (Such as AI precise question solving and big data learning analysis), thereby transforming anxiety into an expectation for "certain success."

4.1.4. Reflected Values:

This model profoundly reflects a value of "competitive collectivism" in Chinese society: the goal of individual struggle is to gain an advantage within collective competition, and education is seen as the most effective tool for upward mobility for individuals and families. It emphasizes efficiency, discipline, obedience, and quantifiable achievement output.

4.2. British Advertisements: Constructing Childhood under "Stratified Guidance"

The British cases present a dual or multiple paradigms of childhood construction, reflecting the internal divisions of its education system.

4.2.1. Framework:

Narratives are more diverse. In elite preparation ads like those from "Atom Learning," the narrative framework revolves around "unlocking every child's potential" and "facing challenges confidently," emphasizing personalized guidance rather than collective pressure. In "BBC Bitesize" advertisements, the narrative emphasizes "making learning happen anytime, anywhere" and "discovering the fun of learning," with a more relaxed, inclusive, fun-oriented framework.

4.2.2. Symbols:

Visual symbols vary depending on the target audience. Elite oriented advertisements may feature glimpses of Oxford and Cambridge campuses as symbols of success, or scenes of one-on-one communication between children and mentors. Inclusive oriented advertisements showcase more scenes of children learning happily in informal settings such as parks and buses, with more relaxed and natural facial expressions.

4.2.3. Emotional appeals:

Emotional appeals are also dual track. One type is to stimulate the "Ambition" of middle-class families, that is, the desire to enter top academic institutions; Another type is to stimulate the "fun" and "curiosity" of all children, constructing learning as an internally driven exploratory activity.

4.2.4. Reflected Values:

This "stratified-guidance" construction reflects the deep-seated dual-track values of the British education system: on the one hand, it acknowledges and maintains an elitist tradition and logic of class reproduction based on academic ability; on the other hand, it upholds a liberal and inclusive ideal, emphasizing that education should cater to the interests and development of each individual and serve a certain function of social mobility.

5. Cross-Cultural Interpretation

The differences between Chinese and British digital education advertisements are rooted in their respective socio-cultural soils. China's "competitive collectivism" model is closely related to the social competitive pressure under its rapid development, the legacy of "examination culture" from its historical imperial examination system, and the collectivist orientation that values family investment. The UK's "stratified-guidance" model corresponds to its long history of a class-based society, an early-tracking education system (e. g. the 11+ exam), and liberal and individualistic cultural traditions.

Digital education advertisements thus serve as a "prism" through which the deep structure of a country's educational culture can be glimpsed; they both reflect and reinforce these existing socio-cultural logics and values.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

This study, through a comparison of Chinese and British digital education advertisements, reveals how commercial communication content participates in the construction of social values and childhood paradigms. The main findings can be summarized as follows: Chinese advertisements tend to construct a childhood imagery centered on "competitive collectivism," emphasizing efficiency and mobility; whereas British advertisements present a "stratified guidance" model of childhood construction that integrates dual orientations of elitism and inclusivism.

This research has significant practical and social implications. Practically, it provides profound suggestions for the localized strategies of digital education brands in cross-cultural communication. For instance, Chinese brands entering the UK market need to carefully adjust their anxiety-driven and collective-competition-core narratives, shifting instead to emphasize personalized support, learning fun, and potential development. Socially, this study prompts us to consider how digital media, as a carrier of educational ideology globally, continuously influences and shapes the next generation's perceptions of education, success, and even self-worth—a process worthy of ongoing attention and critical scrutiny.

This study also has several limitations. Firstly, although the case analysis is representative, it does not cover all types of educational products in both countries. Secondly, the research focuses on textual analysis and does not delve into the actual reception and interpretation of these advertisements by adolescents and parents in both cultures as audiences. Future research could introduce audience ethnography, in-depth interviews, or experimental methods to explore how audiences from different cultural backgrounds decode these advertising messages and how these messages tangibly affect their educational choices and self-perceptions. Furthermore, expanding the comparative scope to include more countries (e.g., the United States, Finland, India) would further enrich our understanding of the global landscape of digital education communication.

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