

Chinese Consumers' Perception of Advertising: A Regional Analysis

Jun Yu
Emporia State University

Joyce X. Zhou
Emporia State University

Bin Yu
Xinzhou Teachers University

The purpose of the study is to examine the heterogeneity of the Chinese market with regard to consumer attitudes toward advertising. Specifically, we focus on the difference in attitudes toward advertising between consumers in inland China and those in coastal China. Given the marked differences in various economic factors between the two regions, we hypothesize differences on key advertising values, such as deceptiveness, informativeness, entertainment and irritation. Results indicate that it is useful to devise different advertising strategies due to consumer attitude toward advertising.

INTRODUCTION

In the past three decades, China has experience tremendous economic growth. An annual growth rate of 8% has enabled the country to become the second largest economy in the world. Companies, both domestic and international, have entered fierce competition in this highly competitive consumer market. Today it is one of the most intense advertising battlegrounds in the world (Hung et al., 2011). Between 2016 and 2020, even with a slower growth rate, advertising spending in China will increase by 8-12% each year (IHS Markit, 2016). This trend is particularly significant given that as recent as the late sixties and early seventies (during the “Cultural Revolution”) advertising was considered an “evil” and a reflection of capitalistic decadence.

This rapid change has meant the Chinese have experienced a rapid increase in the intensity of advertising across the country. However it is important to recognize that China’s consumer market is not a uniform one. There are significant differences between the Chinese in the coastal and inland regions of China in terms of economic development and consumer behavior (Dou, et al, 2006; Zhou et al., 2010). The coastal region on the East has long been gateway to the international market, and the manufacturing industries have been developed to serve international markets, especially since the “open-door” policy was put into place in the late 1970s. In contrast, the inland region has traditionally relied on agriculture and industries that rely on natural resources (Yeung and Hu, 1992; Zhou et al., 2010). It has been argued that the differences in economic development between the two regions may be related to consumer behavior. For example, from the cultural materialism perspective, Zhou et al. (2010) pointed out some important differences in consumer hedonic shopping behavior.

Consumer attitude toward advertising has always been of interest to advertising researchers. Some research has found that many consumers have a negative view of advertising (Mittal, 1994; Zanot, 1985). However, there is also some evidence showing that some consumers have more positive views about advertising (Bauer and Greyser, 1968). It is conceivable that consumers may hold different views about advertising. In other words, some consumers may hold a more positive view about advertising than others. Since consumers' attitude toward advertising affect their involvement with advertisements in significant but complex ways (Brackett and Carr 2001; Briggs and Hollis 1997), understanding target consumers' attitude toward advertising would be highly beneficial to advertisers.

If there is indeed difference in consumer perception of the role played by advertising, then it behooves advertisers, especially advertisers from other countries, to carefully consider the implications. At a minimum, they should not only think about the benefit of possibly customize their advertising strategy for China, but also study the viability of customize promotional messages that focus on different parts of China.

In the sections that follow, we offer a brief discussion on the differences between the coastal and inland regions in China, hypotheses of our research, and data used for the analysis. We conclude the paper after the presentation and discussion of the results.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

As Ewing et al. (2005) recognized, the standardization-adaptation issue related to advertisement applies in both inter- and intracountry contexts. China provides an appropriate setting for conducting spatial advertising research due to disparity in economic development and cultural differences between its more developed coastal areas and the developing inner land. Cui and Liu (2000) discussed the regional market segments of China in term of geographic diversity and economic disparity. Besides the vast inland region of China, about half of the country's thirty provinces and municipalities are located in the coastal region, from Liaoning in the north to Guangxi in the south. Many differences between the two regions are easily observable and have been long recognized. For example, regional income inequality in China, shown as real GDP per capita suggests that average per capita income in coastal regions triple the amount of that in inland regions. Coastal and inland regions of China have obvious disparities in economic opportunities. Furthermore, many factors that influence the regional inequalities include government policies, geographical location and infrastructure facilities (Fu, 2004). Gu and Chen (2005) indicate that the coastal provinces are integrating rapidly into the global markets while the inland regions are lagging behind in the industrialization process. Such differences between the two regions have been founded to contribute to the formation of two different consumer subcultures (Dou et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2010).

If differences in consumer behavior in general between the coastal region and the inland region exist, it is not unreasonable to assume that there might also be differences in consumers' attitude towards advertising. As indicated earlier, research that explores consumer attitude toward advertising has a relatively long history. In this study, we utilize the research findings by Ducoffe (1995). Ducoffe (1995) introduced a new construct named advertising value, which can be defined as "a subjective evaluation of the relative worth or utility of advertising to consumers". Advertising value can serve as a guideline for measuring customer satisfaction with advertising messages. He proposed and tested a conceptual model, which uses four factors to explain consumer attitude toward advertising: informativeness, entertainment, deceptiveness, and irritation. Informativeness refers to the degree to which consumers find the information presented in the advertisement to be informative about the product being advertised. Pleasant or likeable advertising that entertain the audience fulfill their needs for escapism, diversion, aesthetic enjoyment, or emotional release. Since advertising represents a significant portion of media content, entertainment is a positive source of advertising value for consumers. The other two factors – deceptiveness and irritation – can bring about opposite effects on advertising value. Consumers may find advertising to be less than telling the truth, and this is reflected in the deceptiveness construct. When consumers feel that advertising offend, annoy, insult, or overly manipulative, the value of advertising is reduced. This is represented by the irritation factor.

We propose that the two groups of Chinese have different perceptions of the key advertising values of deceptiveness, informativeness, entertainment and irritation (Ducoffe 1995). Consumers in a more industrialized environment are more likely to have Western-oriented values and are more individualistic than others (Ralston et al., 1993). Individualism is defined as an individual's self-orientation that stresses self-sufficiency, self-control, and self-accomplishment. Indeed, consumers in the inland northern regions have been characterized as "pure and honest" (Cui and Liu 2000), tending to trust people and institutions more easily. In contrast, consumers in the coastal region has been traditionally received more exposure to the Western culture and have internalized some Western values. Past research has found that Chinese coastal consumers tend to be more individualistic (Zhang, et al., 2008). As such, compared with inland consumers, coastal consumers might be more independent in their thinking process when processing advertising messages. Therefore, we have our first hypothesis as:

H₁: The consumers in inland regions perceive advertising as less deceptive than those in coastal regions. Deceptiveness plays a more significant role in contributing to advertising value in coastal region than inland region.

As discussed earlier, the coastal region has been exposed to western influences more than the inland region (e.g., Zhou et al., 2010). Compared with those in the inland region, consumers in the coastal region are more individualistic; they tend to "live one's own life" (Cui and Liu 2000). They are not easily influenced by the outside sources, such as advertising. As such, we would expect that they are more likely to feel advertising irritating.

H₂: Consumers in inland regions perceive advertising to be less irritating than those in coastal regions. Irritation plays a more significant role in contributing to advertising value in coastal region than inland region.

Past research has indicated that one of the core cultural values of the Chinese people is long-term orientation, fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards, in particular, perseverance and thrift (Hofstede, 2005; Zhou et al., 2010). Because of this core value, consumers in both regions may adopt a utilitarian approach in shopping decisions (Zhou et al, 2010). It is likely that they try to evaluate information from as many sources as possible (including advertising) before making a purchase in order to make the best decision. Furthermore, advertising as a source of useful information about products and services is a function of degree to which the populations have access to the full range of advertising media, which include television, newspapers, magazines, radio, and the internet. Inland and coastal Chinese consumers appear to be very similar in their access to the various media. Scarce research on Chinese consumers' consumption of various media has not revealed much differences between the two regions. For example, percentages of coastal consumers using the media of broadcast TV, cable TV, radio, newspaper and magazine are 25%, 83.3%, 8.3%, 75% and 25%, respectively. In the case of inland consumers, the percentages are 31.3%, 68.3%, 24.9%, 54.8% and 40.1% (Cui and Liu 2000). There is no evidence from recent research that there is a substantial difference between the two regions in terms of media consumption.

H₃: Both consumers from the inland and coastal regions will find advertising equally informative. Informativeness plays a significant role in contributing to advertising value in both regions.

Consumers in more developed markets have more opportunities for look for hedonic or experiential activities in their lives (e.g., Arnold, et al., 2005). For example, according to the Cui and Liu (2000) study, more coastal Chinese than inland Chinese are involved in activities such as: going to the movie, visiting the park, listening to music, and traveling. Zhou et al. (2000) found that coastal consumers are more likely than inland consumers to pursue recreational shopping. Such consumption habits likely can

be reflected in the consumption of advertising messages as well. Coastal consumers may be more willing to look for entertainment experiences when being exposed to advertising messages.

H₄: Consumers in the coastal region are more likely to feel advertising entertaining than those in the inland region. Entertainment plays a more significant role in contributing to advertising value in the coastal region.

METHODOLOGY

We use the instrument offered by Ducoffe (1995) which explicitly measures each of these advertising values (see Table 1 and Figure 1). This study provides an opportunity to validate the advertising values instrument in the Chinese context. The questionnaire items were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale, where “1” indicates strongly disagree and “7” strongly agree. For the purpose of this study, two cities, one from the coastal region and the other from the inland region were chosen: Fuzhou, a city on the east coast province of Fujian, and Xinzhou, an inland city in Shanxi Province. A total of 440 respondents completed the surveys, with 195 in Fuzhou and 245 in Xinzhou.

**TABLE 1
THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT**

Informativeness

I1: Advertisements supply relevant information on products

I2: Advertising provides timely information on products

I3: Advertising helps me keep up-to-date about products and services that I need or would like to have

Deceptiveness

D1: Advertisements are deceptive

D2: Advertisements lie

D3: Important facts about products are left out of advertisements

Entertainment

E1: Advertisements are entertaining

E2: Advertising is enjoyable

E3: Advertisements are pleasing

Irritation

Irr1: Advertising is irritating

Irr2: Advertisements insult people's intelligence

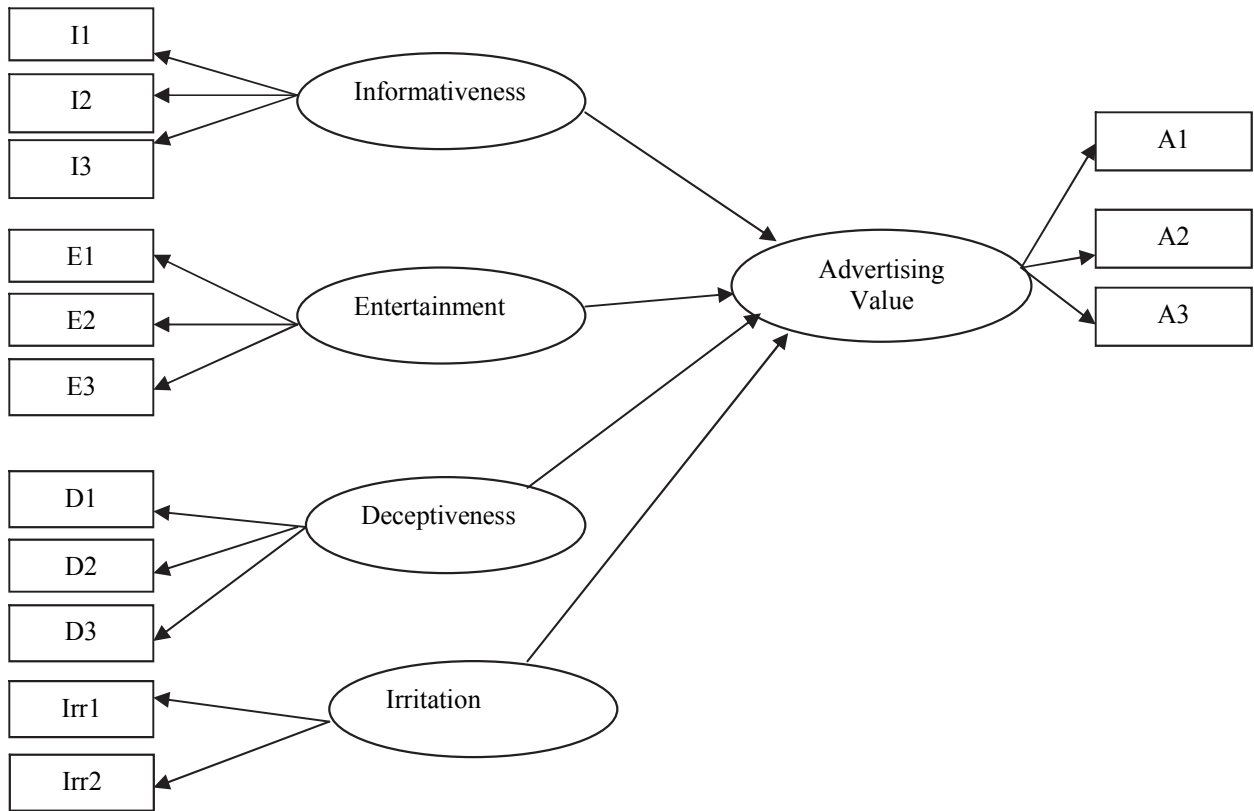
Advertising value

A1: Advertising is valuable

A2: Advertising is useful

A3: Advertising is important

**FIGURE 1
THE RESEARCH MODEL**



Note:

1. The research model for the inland group does not include the construct of irritation.
2. Factor loadings related to I1, E1, D1, Irr1, and A1 are set to one.

The questionnaire was translated into Chinese by a professional translator, and pre-tested with Chinese students in a mid-western university in the US. Notably, we used the back-translation method to ensure that the translated research instrument carries the same meaning in China as those in an English-speaking country. There are little conceptual and measurement issues in the present study since respondents from both group were asked to answer a Chinese-version questionnaire. Instructions were given to the respondents, who were undergraduate students in Fuzhou University and Xinhou Normal University, respectively. There were 152 students female and 93 male students in the Xinzhou sample, and 114 female and 81 are male students in the Fuzhou sample.

FINDINGS

Before we examine the proposed hypotheses, it is necessary to examine measurement equivalence across the inland and coastal groups using a hierarchical structural equation modeling (SEM). Metric equivalence, the corner stone of measurement equivalence, is achieved when score on the measure of some hypothesized variable is the same from respondents across different populations (e.g., regions or cultures). Extending the research by Mullen (1995) and Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998), Myers et al. (2000) employ a multi-group structural equations modeling approach to assess metric equivalence in three

distinct constructs – namely, attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and buyer intent – across U.S. and Korean samples. More recently, Moore et al. (2003) assess the metric equivalence of price cue measures across U.S. and Polish consumers. According to the procedure outlined by Moore, et al. (2003), the first step is to examine the configural invariance where no constraints are put on factor loadings, factor variance, and factor correlations for both groups.

In our study, initial confirmatory factor tests of the hypothesized measurement model indicated satisfactory fit in each of the two groups (CFIs are .942 and .962 for the inland group and the coastal group, respectfully). When the model related to both groups are simultaneously examined, the test produced a chi-square of 206.41 with 134 degrees of freedom (d.f.). The confirmatory fit index (CFI) = .952, the Tucker-Lewis fit index (TLI) = .935, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .036. On the basis of the CFI, TLI and RMSEA, the 5-factor model seems to be supported in both groups. Accordingly, some may claim that both groups exhibit appropriate factor structure and proceed with the analysis of constrained models to determine the source of any likely differences related to the factor loadings between these two groups.

However, by examining the factor loadings at the individual item level, we find that the items used to estimate the irritation construct are problematic. Specifically, though the factor loadings for the two items associated with the irritation construct are statistically significant for the coastal group, they are not statistically significant for the inland group even at the .10 significance level (there are only two indicators for the irritation construct, but the selection of marker indicators does not statistically influence the measurement invariance evaluation in our case). This finding leads us to suspect that the latent construct of irritation is composed differently with respect to the measured variables. To further examine the appropriateness of our judgment, we proceed with the second step analysis where the factor loadings are set to be equal across both groups and this was accomplished by constraining the Φ s to be equal across both groups. This produces a chi-square of 229.94 with 143 degrees of freedom. The CFI = .942, the TLI = .927, and the RMSEA = .038. The chi-square difference between the simple structural model (i.e., the unconstrained model) and the equal factor loadings model is 23.60 with 9 d.f., and this is significant at the .05 significance level which indicates that the factor loadings are different across the two groups. This finding further confirms our suspicion that the relationships among the factors were not necessarily modeled satisfactorily. Further tests for invariance are based on the Lagrange Multiplier Test (LMTTest). Based on the LMTTest results, we revise our model in which items D3 and Irr2 are not constrained to equal across two groups, and yield a chi-square of 215.32 with 141 d.f. The CFI = .951, the TLI = .936, and the RMSEA = .036. The chi-square difference between the unconstrained model and this revised model was 8.98 with 7 d.f., and this is not statistically significant even at the .10 significance level. As a result, we conclude that the factor loadings are partially invariant. Next, we proceed with the analysis of invariant factor variances and found an insignificant chi-square difference (chi-square difference = .25 with a d.f. of 4). Likewise, comparisons of the factor covariance reveal an insignificant chi-square difference (chi-square difference = 6.95 with a d.f. of 6).

Overall, our empirical findings reveal that the specified factorial structure was not necessarily identical. Specifically, a five-factor measurement model seems to fit the coastal group but a four-factor measurement model (without the irritation construct) seems to fit the inland group better. Covariance matrices and summary statistics along with the coefficient alpha for the inland and coastal samples are reported in Table 2. Except for the construct of irritation (.51 for the inland group and .65 for the coastal group) and deceptiveness (.66 for the inland group), the coefficient alpha exceeded Nunnally's .70 minimum for the remaining constructs across two groups (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). This information provides additional support to exclude the irritation factor in the SEM analysis for the inland group. Moreover, fit indices associated with the research models are reported in Table 3.

TABLE 2
COVARIANCE MATRICES AND SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR THE INLAND AND
COASTAL SAMPLES

Inland	I1	I2	I3	D1	D2	D3	E1	E2	E3	Irr1	Irr2	A1	A2	A3
I1	2.85													
I2	1.29	2.29												
I3	1.22	1.24	2.25											
D1	-.13	-.07	-.18	2.48										
D2	-.07	-.05	-.05	1.80	2.86									
D3	-.27	-.12	-.19	.76	.66	2.94								
E1	.81	.58	.68	-.01	.10	.36	2.87							
E2	.56	.29	.34	.11	.06	.24	1.17	2.23						
E3	.65	.42	.49	-.29	-.11	.03	1.17	1.04	2.29					
Irr1	-.26	-.11	.02	-.25	-.41	.05	-.08	-.62	-.07	2.94				
Irr2	.17	.22	-.02	.13	.14	.44	-.03	-.13	-.12	.95	2.66			
A1	.72	.43	.60	-.30	-.20	-.24	.49	.17	.42	.18	.10	2.28		
A2	.82	.51	.64	-.22	-.24	-.14	.60	.45	.39	-.10	.01	1.26	2.38	
A3	.77	.34	.52	-.06	-.18	.03	.55	.43	.92	.34	-.11	.84	1.21	2.67
Mean	5.09	5.18	5.04	5.16	5.27	4.64	4.82	4.34	3.89	3.16	3.92	4.53	4.69	4.68
Std.	1.69	1.51	1.50	1.57	1.69	1.72	1.69	1.49	1.51	1.72	1.63	1.51	1.54	1.64
Coefficient alpha: Informativeness (.76); Deceptiveness (.66); Entertainment (.72); Irritation (.51; this construct was not included in the final SEM analysis); Advertising value (.71)														
Coastal	I1	I2	I3	D1	D2	D3	E1	E2	E3	Irr1	Irr2	A1	A2	A3
I1	2.76													
I2	1.37	2.22												
I3	1.25	1.14	2.19											
D1	.20	.08	.07	2.39										
D2	.24	.17	-.05	1.79	2.64									
D3	.15	-.08	-.15	1.12	1.39	2.18								
E1	.62	.63	.98	.20	.09	.13	2.50							
E2	.34	.25	.44	-.12	-.34	-.11	.94	2.14						
E3	.12	.14	.37	.13	-.02	.12	.83	1.16	2.06					
Irr1	-.29	-.51	-.43	.54	.48	.75	-.41	-.45	-.18	2.72				
Irr2	-.05	-.24	-.05	.60	.44	.53	-.44	-.76	-.31	1.25	2.54			
A1	.69	.78	.65	-.06	-.02	-.23	.41	.60	.47	-.49	-.52	1.64		
A2	.87	.84	.84	-.07	-.06	-.22	.57	.82	.42	-.59	-.53	1.11	1.89	
A3	.76	.63	.54	-.09	-.05	-.03	.30	.57	.14	-.21	-.26	.69	1.17	2.52
Mean	4.89	4.98	5.05	5.02	5.18	4.86	4.56	4.07	3.87	3.49	4.18	4.18	4.41	4.14
Std.	1.66	1.49	1.48	1.55	1.63	1.48	1.58	1.64	1.44	1.65	1.59	1.28	1.37	1.59
Coefficient alpha: Informativeness (.77); Deceptiveness (.82); Entertainment (.70); Irritation (.65); Advertising value (.74)														

**TABLE 3
FIT INDICES**

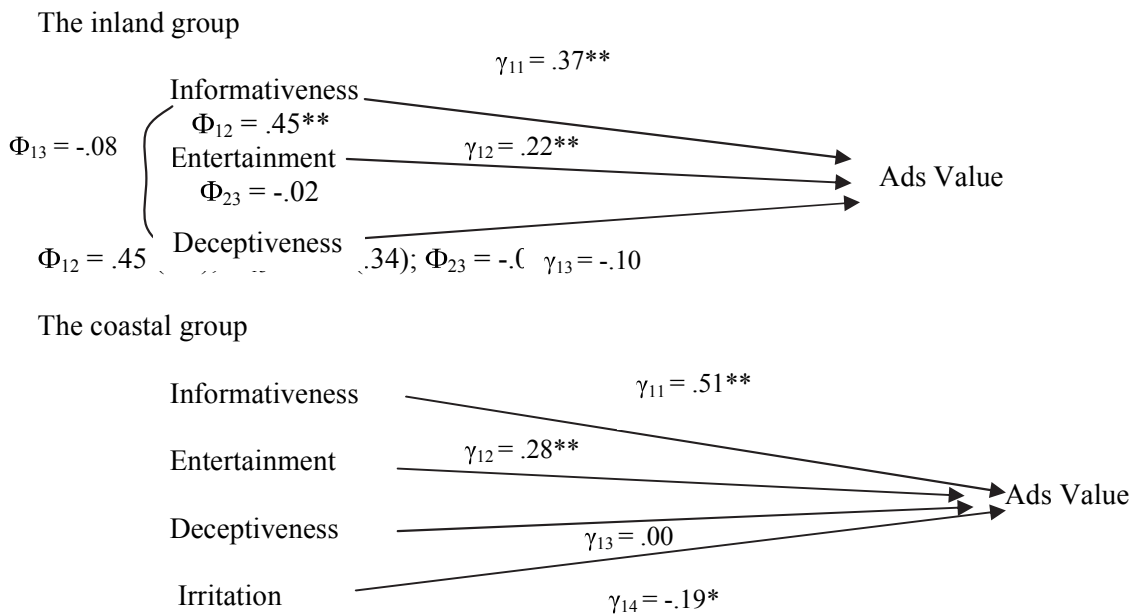
Model	chi-square	d.f.	chi-square/d.f.	P-value	CFI	NNFI	RMSEA
The inland group	66.13	48	1.34	.04	.97	.96	.04
The coastal group	95.39	67	1.42	.01	.96	.95	.05

To examine hypothesis H1, that inland consumers are less sensitive to the deceptiveness in advertising than coastal consumers, we compare the SEM results related to the inland group with four constructs and the coastal group with five constructs (see Table 4). Our findings indicate that deceptiveness in advertising is neither statistically significant in the inland group nor in the coastal group. A multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA) test with the three measurement items for deceptiveness being the dependent variables confirms this finding (P-value for Wilks' Lambda = .27). Together, these results do not lend support to H1.

**TABLE 4
SEM CAUSAL MODELS**

	The inland group	The coastal group
Informativeness → Ads Value	.37 (.00)	.51 (.00)
Entertainment → Ads Value	.22 (.02)	.28 (.00)
Deceptiveness → Ads Value	-.10 (.16)	.00 (.96)
Irritation → Ads Value	NA	-.19 (.08)

Note: The standardized coefficients are reported in the above table with its associated P-value in parentheses.



$\Phi_{12} = .27 (.00)$; $\Phi_{13} = .07 (.47)$; $\Phi_{14} = -.19 (.07)$; $\Phi_{23} = -.10 (.29)$; $\Phi_{24} = -.42 (.00)$; $\Phi_{34} = .35 (.00)$
 ** indicates a .05 level of significance while * indicates a .10 level of significance.

Hypothesis H2 states that inland consumers are less likely to find advertising irritating than coastal consumers. Since the measurement items associated with the irritation construct (i.e., Irr1 and Irr2) are not statistically significant for the inland group while the same items are found to be statistically significant for the coastal group in the measurement model, H2 is supported by the data.

Next, hypothesis H3 states that consumers in inland regions will find advertising informative as well as the consumers in coastal regions. Based on the CFA results for both groups (see Table 3), the informativeness turns out to have a significant and positive impact on advertising value (p-value = .00 for both groups). In addition, the MANOVA test results also lend support to H3 (p-value for Wilks' Lambda = .33) in finding no statistical difference between the inland group and the coastal group in terms of informativeness.

Finally, hypothesis H4 states that consumers in the coastal region are likely to feel advertising entertaining more than those in the inland region. Similar to the case for informativeness, the CFA results show that the entertainment factor has a significant and positive impact on advertising value (p-value = .02 for the inland group while P-value = .00 for the coastal group). Moreover, the MANOVA test results indicate that there is no statistical difference between the two groups in terms of entertainment (p-value for Wilk's Lambda = .14). Therefore, H4 is not supported by the data.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This research follows the recent stream of research in regional comparison of consumer behavior and consumer culture (Cui and Liu, 2000; Sun and Collins, 2005; Zhou et al., 2010). We aimed to compare consumer perception of advertising value between the coastal and inland regions of China. The findings indicate that the inland and coastal samples differ in the degree to which they find advertising to be irritating, and not on the other three dimensions that contribute to advertising value (informativeness, entertainment, and deceptiveness). The relevance of this study is directly linked to the rapid rise of the advertising industry in China, as it keeps pace with the country's growing economic power in the world. Since advertising spending has exponentially increased in China, findings such as ours would help marketers think more carefully when they try to target the Chinese market.

Our results indicate that consumers in inland China find advertising less irritating than those in coastal cities. For advertisers, this implies more flexibility in the type and frequency of advertising for inland consumers, in comparison to coastal consumers. Secondly, our results indicate that consumers in both inland city and coastal city look to advertising as an information source on products and services. Thus "advertising as information" is expected by consumers and will be well received by both the inland and coastal consumers. Overall, the study results indicate that it may not be in the best interest of advertisers to view China as one homogenous market. Specifically, advertisers can leverage the differences between inland and coastal consumers to their advantage. This issue will become more relevant as companies and advertisers will have to decide advertising strategies in inland China, given the priority placed by inland provincial governments to attract businesses away from the coastal region.

An additional outcome of this study is that the measurement instrument may have limitations. This study shows that the validity of "irritation" as an advertising value is questionable. More research must be done to test the instrument in culturally varied populations, and refine the items of the instrument, if needed.

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