

Cultural Differences in Makeup Advertisements, Taking Korean and American Brands as Examples

Zhiwei Huang

*BASIS International School of Guangzhou, Jiantashan Road, Guangzhou, Guangdong province,
China*

zhiwei.huang13717-bigz@basischina.com

Abstract: This research is about the differences in makeup advertisements, especially the lipstick branch, between Korea and America and the reasons for them. America and Korea are famous for their production of makeup products, so their makeup advertisements are representative. Although their commercial and marketing strategies are very similar and many similarities can be found in their advertisements, there are still many differences that consumers can observe. By looking into the makeup commercials from both countries from a transcultural perspective and considering the cultural background between the two countries, this paper finds that cultural differences have an impact on makeup advertisements. Specifically, Korea and America have different strategies in terms of model choice and color usage. Korea prefers super idols and light colors while America chooses professional models and dark colors. It is essential for different countries to learn from each other and create the most suitable types of advertisements for consumers with different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: makeup advertisement, transcultural perspective, fan economy.

1. Introduction

Some scholars have looked into the cultural differences between Korea and America. There are also several analyses about the particular social characteristics in both countries. Their studies showed that Korea and America have very large cultural differences [1]. While America is famous as the country which started the women's rights movement early, Korean females now are still struggling to gain equality and respect in society [2,3]. With all the differences in social environments, it is obvious that other areas will be affected. However, there is little research that gives a systematic analysis of the makeup branches in these two countries and both of them are famous for their makeup brands. By looking into different advertisements and cultural contexts in both countries from a transcultural perspective, this paper analyzes the differences in makeup advertisements, especially the lipstick advertisements. It is found that the biggest differences in the makeup commercials between the two countries are the choice of model and the usage of color. Although these advertising methods have their advantages in their own ways, there are also many disadvantages. Those differences are attributed to the cultural differences in these two countries.

2. Choice of Model

2.1. Fan Economy and Professionalism

One difference can be seen in the choice of model. While most Korean commercials like 3CE choose famous idols, actors, or even online influencers to promote their commercials, America generally prefers professional models like the brand MAC. Those idols and actors in Korea have a stable and large group of fans on the Internet who are willing to buy the products promoted by the people they like. In order to support their idols and show their buying power, the sales of these lipstick products will increase greatly. Many fans will even consider themselves the “girlfriends” of some particular idols and have an obligation to spend money on them. As the research done by Wu suggests, fans would form a group online and supervise each other to spend money on the idols, and those who do not purchase those products represented by their idols might be called “free riders” by other fans [4]. More importantly, these brands may also hire influencers to promote their products online. These influencers post photos of their products online, giving the products more chances to be seen by the public. Unlike idols, these influencers may not have a steady fan base, but their followers on social media might see the photos of the lipstick advertisement and make the purchase.

In contrast, American advertising also uses an influencer strategy to promote the products to the public, but the models in the advertisements are still mostly professional models. These models are systematically trained to use their faces to present the products at best. With the knowledge they have acquired from modeling schools and the experience they have gained from shooting various commercials in the past, the professional models can accurately meet the expectations of the directors of the commercials. This can give a lot of credibility to the products and brands, as famous models are willing to shoot the commercials. The sales figures of these American commercials may not be as promising as those of the Korean ones, but the customers who have watched them are very likely to make a purchase. The Korean commercials are promising, but non-fan customers may not be as interested in them as the fans. The number of non-fan sales could depend on the quality of the lipsticks. This could also confuse other customers as they might misjudge the popularity of the lipsticks. With the number of sales on the shopping websites, it is hard for the customers to distinguish whether the number of sales is based on the beautiful colors of the lipsticks or the number of the idols’ fans.

2.2. Idol Industry in Both Countries

Korea is a country that valued its idol industry greatly and nowadays there is a trend of “idol diplomatic” happening in the country. K-Pop culture, with the rise of famous Korean groups like BTS and Black Pink, has become increasingly important and begun a trend both in Korea and the whole world. In June, people around the world are surprised to find that Biden, the president of America, even met BTS in the white house. BTS used its popularity in the world to represent the image of Korea in the whole world. With the high value of hope put on those idols, it is not a surprise to see the citizens in Korea also take a great part in the development of the idol industry. Since most of the fans of those K-Pop groups are females, they may actually use makeup products after buying them. Instead of thinking that they are just a waste of money like buying albums, fans can use those makeups in their daily life. Moreover, the price of the makeup in Korea is not very high so the fans will just consider the lipsticks as an investment failure without actually costing them lots of money. In the end, fans are very likely to buy those makeups compared to other products that their idols represent, like message machines. In order to follow the trend of idol development and forecast the potential economic profit that the idol industry can bring, makeup brands in Korea started to hire well-known idols to represent their brands and model for their advertisements [5]. For those makeup brands, hiring famous idols to represent their brands not only ensures a considerable sale rate but also improves their

popularity. For example, a famous girls' group well known in the world called Black Pink has been representing the hair-dyeing product from Amore pacific for the past few years. Since their representation in the commercial, the average sales per year of this product have been increasing by 90 percent. Although there might be other factors influencing this amount of increase, it is still a clear illustration of how hiring idols might help promote a brand's popularity and sale rate.

Different from the high value that idols can bring in Korean society, stars and celebrities in America are not valued very much. Most American people just view stars as people who provide them with entertainment like music and movies. As a result, using stars in makeup commercials will not necessarily affect the brands' sale rates. More importantly, most brands in America are famous already and they are mostly famous for their quality. They do not actually need idols to help them open the market. Instead, they spend more time in improving their products. By using models to represent their brands, companies can more effectively show consumers the effects of the products. With the bone structures of models' faces, they can convey the effects of the products more directly and persuade potential clients to buy them.

3. Usage of Color

3.1. Light and Dark Colors

While most of 3CE's lipstick commercials are in bright and vibrant colors like pink and orange, the commercials for MAC are mostly in dark colors like black [6,7]. Despite the different use of colors, the overall images are made of the same textures that make the models' faces stand out. The framing of the two commercials is also the same, with the lipsticks on one side and the photos of the models on the other. With this type of framing, the brands can show not only the appearances of the lipsticks and their colors but also their effects on a person's face. In this way, consumers can get a full picture of the lipsticks in the advertisements. Despite the similarities in the commercials, the differences between them lie in the use of colors. The use of bright colors in Korean commercials can catch the audience's attention very quickly. Potential customers will eventually click on the page and make the purchase. This is indeed a very helpful method to catch people's attention.

On the other hand, MAC's commercials are not that attractive but with the black background, the contrast of the dark background allows the model's face to show the color of the lipstick better. In fact, the dark background highlights the model's face with the lipstick and draws the audience's attention entirely to the face. Therefore, customers who want to buy lipsticks will focus their eyes on the model's face and the appropriateness of the lipstick color on it. In this way, customers can better understand the products and decide whether the lipstick color is suitable for them or not. They might feel more confident in their purchase decision because the advertisements really convince them. Although this use of advertisement can also lead to an increase in sale rate, it is not very noticeable to potential buyers. Just by watching commercials on the Internet, it is sometimes difficult to attract people's attention. However, Korean commercials also have major drawbacks. By using bright colors, it is not possible to fully show how the lipstick colors look on people's faces. Since the bright colors are very likely to make the skin colors dark and filters are sometimes added in the commercials. Ultimately, the commercials lose the credibility of showing the exact colors, and consumers may feel unsure.

3.2. Reasons for the Differences

The reasons for these differences can be also derived from the brands' use of different models. Most popular idols in Korea have the same face characteristic, with a full apple zone and a rather smooth bone structure. As a result, the bright colors of the makeup advertisements' backgrounds will maximize their advantages in the faces. Korea is a patricidal country and although women's status

was improved in the past few years, the dominant aesthetics in the country is still trying to cater to males [8]. Males are most likely to want to see a female who is portrayed as innocent and clean. In the end, this leads to the makeup styles of Korea which emphasize the apple zone with blusher and white and clean base. Using bright colors that ensemble the lipstick colors in the background can effectively show the clean and white base with a full apple zone.

Different from Korean makeup, American makeup commercials often use dark colors [9]. The most representative advertisements use models with high cheekbones and noses. By using dark colors in the background, it can best illustrate their advantages in the faces and the textures of the makeup. In the history of America, the raising of female power began very early [10]. Back in the 1880s, there were females advocating for equal rights and an equal system is fully developed now. The aesthetics for those American commercials, as a result, do not need to follow the aesthetics of males but can show whatever the producers want. It is successful female figure who can afford good makeup.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the cultural differences in Korea and America lead to the differences in makeup advertisements. Since both countries have different cultural habitats and different interpretations of pop culture, it is obvious that they will have different ways of showing their products. Culture indeed has an impact on society and this can also be found in makeup advertisements. However, with the realization of female power in Korean society and the constantly changing values in both countries, the research can only provide a temporary solution. The conclusion is based on the social environment now. Despite the limitation of time, this research can still provide an interpretation of how culture will affect society, such as the makeup advertisements.

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