

Differences and Strategies of High and Low Context Cultures from the Perspective of Burberry's Advertisement

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Abstract—This paper discusses the differences between high and low context cultures from the perspective of Burberry's Chinese New Year advertisement. It explains the differences between high and low context cultures in the aspects of information dissemination and interpersonal relationship. And the author points out the roots of differences from the three factors of religious, language and mode of thinking and the social history. Then the author proposes solutions and strategies to cross cultural communication in high and low context cultures. Adopting comparative method and case analysis method to expound these theories, this paper draws a conclusion that we should build cultural awareness and adopt two strategies to make intercultural communications successfully. The innovation of this paper lies in discussing the high and low context cultural differences from the information dissemination aspect and interpersonal relationship aspect and proposes a strategy of figuring out and speaking out accordingly when do cross cultural communications of high and low context cultures.

Keywords— *high and low context cultures; roots of differences; figure out; speak out; Burberry's advertisement*

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese lunar New Year is coming, and many companies launch their advertisements to capture Chinese market. So does Burberry, the high level luxury brand comes from the Great Britain. "Modern Chinese New Year", this ad campaign focuses on China lunar New Year and displays reunion of family members, however it draws criticism in China as well as other foreign media. Many Chinese describe it like a ghost film, Fashion United from Holland and CNBC in America both use "creepy" to describe the advertisement. Burberry should have displayed "harmony" in his "Modern Chinese New Year" advertisement, but to his dismay, this advertisement seems a little bit of "not acclimatized". In most Chinese opinion the advertisement couldn't show the happy family atmosphere with the gray tones and mournful expressions of the models [1].

But why does this happen? The key reason is that Chinese culture is a high context culture, while English culture is a low context culture.

II. DEFINITION OF HC CULTURES AND LC CULTURES

High context cultures or HC cultures and low context cultures or LC cultures concepts were firstly introduced by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his 1976 book *Beyond Culture*. HC cultures are those in which the rules of communication are primarily transmitted through the using of contextual elements (e.g., body language, a person's status, and tone of voice) and are not explicitly stated. This is in direct contrast with LC cultures, in which information transmission mainly depends on language and it is stated explicitly through language [2].

That is to say in the process of verbal communication, if most of the information exists in the material context and the expression of the discourse meaning is highly dependent on the context, then the culture is a HC culture. On the other hand, if only a small amount of information is contained in the implicit environment and most of the information meaning is expressed through speech, in other words, the general meaning is less dependent on context which we call a LC culture [3]. It is not difficult to see that the degree of dependence on context in the process of information dissemination is an important indicator to distinguish and judge whether a culture belongs to a HC culture or a LC culture.

Hall and some scholars propose that there is a diagram to distinguish national cultures from HC to LC, the sequences are as following: Japanese, Chinese, Korean, African American, Native American, Arab, Greek, Latin, Italian, English, French, American, Scandinavian and German [4]. From this we could see that Chinese culture is a HC culture, while English culture including Great Britain and the United States are LC cultures.

III. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HC AND LC CULTURES

Actually there are not absolutely "high context" and "low context" cultures, whereas a comparison between cultures may find communication differences to a certain extent. People often define "high" and "low" context cultures by language group, nationality, or regional community. Here, in this paper, the author will also define the "high" and "low" context cultures by nationalities, typically, China as a

representative of HC culture and the United States as a representative of LC culture.

Generally speaking, there are two main differences between high and low context cultures from the information dissemination aspect and interpersonal relationship aspect [5]. And when we transmit information, we use not only words, or verbal communications but also our actions, or nonverbal communications. Since different nations have different communication styles, there are definitely differences between verbal and nonverbal communications between HC cultures and LC cultures.

A. Verbal and Nonverbal Differences

As a means of expressing ideas, language or verbal communication is the primary tool in conveying information. Nonverbal communications, which include eyes contacts, gestures, facial expressions, silence, physical contact, distance between speakers, concept of time, etc., play an important role in high context cultures. On the other hand, in low context cultures, nonverbal communications seldom take effect. Information is mainly conveyed by explicit language, or, we also call it verbal communication.

Comparing HC cultures with LC cultures there exists the following differences between verbal communications and nonverbal communications in the information dissemination aspect.

- Differences in Silence
- In HC cultures, people value silence in communication, and in their opinions, silence and pause have a lot of meanings. Silence can express agreement as well as keep your own opinions [6]. In some HC cultures, especially in China, silence refers to modest and profound. However, in LC cultures, people mainly get communicated with language, and they regard silence as lacking of confidence. So if there appears silence between conversations, the communicators will feel embarrassed. In a word, the attitude towards silence is different in HC cultures and LC cultures. The former praise silence, while the latter avoid silence in communication.
- Differences in Time
- In HC cultures, people have got a polychromic time system, and they are also past-time oriented. Taking time as a constitution of points, they usually do several things at the same time. It is the result that matters, but not the process. When it comes to the LC cultures, things could be completely different. People in LC cultures take a monochromic time system. They treat time as a straight line. And they are future-time oriented, always have tightly and organized schedules. In short, time processing is very flexible in HC cultures, but in LC cultures people follow strict time line.
- Differences in Space and Touch

- It is said that how people arrange space reflects how close they are and whether they want interaction or not. People in HC cultures share the same space and can live or work close to each other, they less express their feelings of territoriality. And also because lack of this feeling, they stand close together and touch more. Especially close relationship are shown in the same gender. Whereas, people in LC cultures place high value on personal privacy, so they stand far apart and they want large lots to increase the distance between them and others. They have a strong feeling of territoriality, and tend to stand apart and touch less.

In conclusion, HC cultures place more value on nonverbal communication and less on verbal communication. They mainly convey information through implicit communication context. On the contrary, LC cultures emphasize more on verbal communication than nonverbal communication. They prefer a direct and clear way to convey information.

B. Collectivism and Individualism

The concepts of collectivism and individualism have been applied to high and low context cultures by Hofstede in his Cultural Dimensions Theory [7].

Generally, HC cultures are somewhat collectivism and LC cultures tend to be individualistic. As we have already discussed about the differences in the aspect of information dissemination, people from HC cultures prefer stand closer than those from LC cultures, which means they are more likely to develop close relationship with each other. That is the point of interpersonal relationship aspect.

HC cultural communicators attach great importance to maintain harmony and close interpersonal relationships. They also care about others' feelings and faces, so they prefer an indirect and implicit way of communication and try to avoid disputes and unhappiness. On the other hand, communicators from LC cultures attach more importance to individual performance and equal communication. The way of communication is direct and clear, and they seldom care about other people's feelings and faces.

To make a summary, a HC culture will be relational, collectivist, and uncommunicative. They place a high value on interpersonal relationships and group members are a very close-knit community [8]. Instead, a LC culture will be less close-knit, and individuals' communications will have fewer setting clues when interpreting messages.

IV. THE ROOTS OF DIFFERENCES

But why do these differences happen? Why many international companies like Burberry make mistakes like the "Modern Chinese New Year" advertisement? In order to interpret these differences deeply and clearly, this paper will choose China and the United States as representatives of HC and LC cultures and will explain the roots of differences from the following three points.

A. Religious Differences

Religious differences are considered to be the most important reasons. In China, Confucianism, Buddhism and

Taoism have important impacts on Chinese HC culture. The dominant Confucian culture thinks that “careful speech, less words” are virtues worthy of praise, while “rhetoric and talkable” are not benevolent behaviors. Many quotations in “The Analects of Confucius” clearly conveyed such thoughts, such as “being sensitive to things and being careful with words”. The core of Taoist culture is “Tao”, which is also the core concept of Chinese traditional philosophy. The founder Laozi, in his classic, “*Dao De Jing*”, says that “He who knows doesn’t speak, he who speaks doesn’t know”. And Chinese Buddhism encourages people to understand the essence of Buddhism by sitting in meditation. Spiritual enlightenment, the core value of Buddhism, is the most important way to meditate. What Chinese culture pursues is the realm of “words are limited but meanings are infinite” [9].

Comparing with Buddhism in the east, most Western countries believe in Christianity, which dominates Western cultures. There are no exceptions of Americans. Christianity places stress on individualism, such as freedom, equality and fraternity. Christians believe that God create the whole world with his magical words and give people the right to live. According to the Bible, language and God coexist, language is God, and it is language that God creates the whole world with. In short, Christianity emphasizes the importance of language. People naturally communicate with God through words in their daily life. Therefore, the prevalence of Christianity in the West is the religious root for the production of Western LC cultures [10].

B. Different Views of Language and Mode of Thinking

Chinese is an “aesthetic” language, characterized by associative thinking, with more usage of hints, metaphors and images [11]. Especially, the Chinese poem is a representative of aesthetic language. In addition, Chinese language is a topic-prominent construction, which emphasizes hypotaxis. In Chinese, the logical connection between words and sentences is realized with the help of the coherence of the meaning but not by the connection of structures forms [12]. Language is the carrier of thinking, and thinking mode has correlation of language. The loose structure of topic-prominent language is a deductive language so the thinking mode is spiral. This spiral thinking mode, which is characterized by “out of focus”, is the embodiment of HC culture.

Conversely, English is the language of “reason” and “logic”, which is characterized by causality, and pays more attention to the construction and reasoning of language. And what’s more, English is a subject-prominent structure language, and this tight structure enables the communicators to convey their information clearly and accurately. And due to this tight structure, the thinking mode is liner, to express directly. Therefore English is a low context language.

In brief, Chinese language prefers figure out, to understand through the cues from environment; while English language chooses speak out, to communicate with direct and clear words.

C. Different Social Histories

The different social history is one of the most important reasons for such differences. In Chinese history, the long

period of feudal society has confined people’s languages and thoughts. Land-based geographical environment has brought agricultural culture for thousands of years, and the farming industry has made it unnecessary for people to travel around so that they have been in a stable and common social environment for a long time. At the same time, the importance attached to agriculture has made people rely on nature and respect nature, advocate the thinking of “the unity of nature and man”. Because generations of people live on the land with stable families harmoniously with little population mobility, so the same environments and collectivism thus are formed.

However, United States only has several hundreds of history, it is an immigrant country with complex population composition and large mobility. Industrial development makes Americans more focused on efficiency and personal interests, so American culture is individualistic, advocating individual struggle and equality. Lacking of common living environment, Americans are more inclined to adopt direct, explicit ways of communication.

Therefore, HC cultures and LC cultures are not shaped suddenly, religious beliefs, language characteristics and social histories are the reasons for the formation.

V. CONFLICTS AND STRATEGIES

When Burberry launched their “Modern Chinese New Year” to celebrate family traditions and togetherness, the advertiser failed to take Chinese HC culture into consideration, for this was not the first time they have faced criticisms.

Why many Chinese Weibo users described the advertising portrait as “strange”, and the relationship between Chinese famous stars Wei Zhao and Dongyu Zhou was also criticized as superficial, for there is a smile of treachery between them?

The reports from CNBC explain the reason like this: “none of the characters is smiling”. That only gets to one point, another point is that the colors in the ad are gray and black, which are the directly opposite of Chinese New Year’s atmosphere.

As we have discussed in this paper, in HC cultures, people rely on non-verbal communications and intimacies to convey information, rather than direct language. Communication can largely be context driven. That is the main reason Burberry’s advertisement wants to show “harmony” and on the contrary, it shows “creepy” [13].

With the development of economy and the acceleration of global integration, the exchanges of languages and cultures between countries are becoming more and more frequent. So when we do this, we should take the following strategies to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings [14].

First, establish cultural awareness, and adapt to the new culture. Culture awareness means that when we do cross cultural communication, the communicators first have to put into minds that there are differences between different cultures. And the specific characteristics of his own culture and those of other cultures should be both take into consideration. Only cultural awareness has been established, conflicts or misunderstandings like Burberry could have a

chance to be avoided. Then make acculturation to the target culture. Acculturation means one should adapt to the new culture according to the features of the culture and make communication smoothly without misunderstandings. For example, if Burberry knows that Chinese culture is a HC culture, and the specific characteristics of this culture, the advertisement launcher then could adjust their LC culture advertisement to the HC culture, e.g. to create the harmony atmosphere by happy expressions of the models and then get understood by Chinese people.

Second, figure out and speak out. We should take advantages of cultural stereotypes to figure out or speak out the information. Figure out means we should use environmental cues and background knowledge to understand the surface meaning as well as the hidden meaning or we call it the actual meaning. Speak out means we should adopt a direct and explicit language to speak out the information without any context-based information. For example, Burberry should take advantage of HC cultural characteristics, or Chinese cultural stereotypes to understand the implied meaning of the advertisement, and then adjust their advertisement to express the harmony feeling with some background information, e.g. bright colors, intimate interpersonal relationships, smiling faces and so on. On the contrary, when Chinese people communicate with LC cultural communicators, they also should take advantages of LC cultural stereotypes to express their opinions directly and explicitly.

Third, always keep in touch with each other. As globalization processes, intercultural communication activities are increasing. English as a LC culture-oriented international language, its communicative characteristics are gradually being accepted and imitated by other languages. Nations from different cultures should always keep in touch with each other to make sure they are keeping pace with the whole trend and overcome barriers in cross cultural communications. As more and more people are learning Chinese, this HC cultural language has being learned and accepted by more and more nations. Thus, always keeping in touch with each other and keeping pace with the world development is the vital factor in cross cultural communication.

VI. CONCLUSION

China is becoming the biggest international market, many international companies try to capture the Chinese market. While English is an international language, with which global companies communicate. When these global companies communicate in HC market with the low context communicative tool, conflicts and misunderstandings are inevitable.

To make communications successfully, we should build cultural awareness at first. Cultural awareness emphasizes that there are differences between HC cultures and LC cultures. We should admit these cultural differences, which means having cultural awareness, then we could have a chance to

communicate without misunderstandings in cross cultural communications.

And next, we should adopt a strategy of figuring out or speaking out according to HC cultures and LC cultures respectively. Communications in HC cultures are context driven, so we should figure out the environment cues and background information. Conversely, information transmission mainly relay on explicit and direct information, therefore, we should speak out our opinions straight forward.

Last but not least, different nations and different cultures should always keep in touch with each other to learn other cultures as well as get understood by others. Only we can do this, we could know the world trend and take different strategies accordingly to make cross cultural communications smoothly.

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