

**AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL MEANINGS OBTAINED BY CHINESE YOUNG  
ADULTS FROM YAO MING'S DEPICTION IN COMMERCIAL MESSAGES**

**by**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the cultural meanings Chinese young adults obtain from Yao Ming's image in advertising. Yao Ming, a 7-foot-6 inch tall basketball player from Shanghai, China was hired by the Houston Rockets in the first selection of the 2002 NBA draft. His emergence in the NBA has lead to a phenomenon called "Yao Ming Mania." A number of prestigious brands such as Apple, Visa, Pepsi, and Reebok have signed endorsement contracts with him, and Yao Ming has become widely known through endorsement advertisements as well as his media portrayals in NBA coverage. While there are studies on the cultural meanings of celebrities in western countries, a literature review indicates that such research on Chinese athletes is very limited (Dong, 2003).

The research builds on work in audience studies by Wilson and Sparks (1996). They suggest that audiences within an "interpretive community" have similar "interpretive strategies" and different "interpretive communities" have different interpretations of media messages. The research also builds on McCracken's (1989) "meaning transfer" model of celebrity endorsements. He suggests that effective celebrity endorsements help transfer useful meanings from the celebrity to the goods they endorse, and that these meanings are delivered to the consumer through purchasing. Based on the conjunction of the audience research and the "meaning transfer" model, this research examined how the "interpretive community" of Chinese students who are living in Vancouver interpreted the meanings mobilized in the endorsements of Yao Ming.

The research schedule had two phases. In the first, using interpretive analysis, 10 current Yao Ming endorsement ads were analyzed and five representative commercials were selected for use in phase two. Two of the ads were televised in China and the other three were televised in North America. This selection was in order to examine whether there were cultural difference when the viewers interpreted western and Asian commercials of Yao Ming's image. In the second phase, these commercials were viewed by five focus groups of four to six subjects who were university students from China aged 18 to 25, who had studied in Vancouver for 1-4 years. Focus group reactions to the commercials and to related interpretive questions were recorded using questionnaires and audio taping. The interpretive analysis provided a framework for understanding the meanings of the commercials, and the focus groups were intended to help identify the meanings the respondents gave to the commercials upon viewing them.

Focus groups indicate that respondents' attitudes toward Yao Ming were positive and that they thought he delivered positive messages to the endorsed products. Focus group results suggest that three levels of cultural meanings (1. common meanings as a celebrity, 2. Yao's distinctiveness from most other celebrity athletes, 3. his symbolism of Chinese and China) contribute to Yao Ming's marketing popularity and there are no cultural differences of his image portrayed in Chinese and western commercials. The focus group results show that the two levels of consumption of the celebrity image (or the meaning consumption) of Chinese viewers (1. purchased or intended to purchase, 2. would not purchase) were fairly moderate, while all viewers were consistent in valuing the hiring Yao Ming as an endorser. The results also show that the depth of influence of Yao Ming varied between male and female viewers. Moreover, a set of special conditions

may prevail as the result of living abroad and this may have made the Chinese students' feelings toward a Chinese celebrity stronger than for those who live in Mainland China.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background

Yao Ming, nicknamed “a little giant” with his 7-foot-6 inch height was hired by the Houston Rockets in the first selection of the NBA 2002 draft. He was from the Shanghai Sharks team and played for China Men’s Basketball as well. Soon after he emerged on the stage of the NBA in the 2002-2003 seasons, he attracted major attention from marketers and the media. “Yao Ming Mania” has been sweeping both America and China, especially among the Asian populations in these two counties. Yao Ming websites and fan clubs were immediately established. Meanwhile, a group called “Team Yao” consisting of Jonathan Frenzen, a professor of marketing and ten MBA students at University of Chicago, specializes in designing long-term marketing strategies for Yao. Rather than being set back by the Rockets’ failing to make it to the 02-03 play-offs, this interest continues to grow. As a reporter said, “so far, Yao stands tallest in the world of marketing” (Naducci, 2003). Yao is a stylish endorser for a number of well-know brands. In quick succession, a number of prestigious brands signed Yao as their pitchman:

- On January 7, 2003, Sorrent, a leading creator and publisher of games for wireless devices, announced that it signed a contract to develop a Yao Ming-branded basketball game (Clark, 2003).
- On January 7, 2003, Yao made his first commercial debut for Apple Computer’s new notebook computer (Fowler, 2003).
- On January 23, 2003, Yao appeared in a Visa Commercial that was broadcast during the world’s biggest marketing showcase: the Super Bowl (Howard, 2003).



- On January 29, 2003, China Unicom, a listed company on the NASDAQ Stock Market and the second-largest mobile phone operator signed a two-year, approximately US \$3.6 million endorsement with Yao (Espinstar, 2003).
- On February 6, 2003, sports drink maker Gatorade announced its multiyear signing of Yao for its campaign in both the US and China “To be like Yao” quickly became a new popular word in marketing lexicon (Rovell, 2003).
- On September 7, 2003, Sohu.com, a listed company on the NASDAQ Stock Market and one of China's most recognized and established Internet brands, announced Yao as its spokesperson (Sohu, 2003).
- On October 23, 2003, athletic footwear giant Reebok signed a multi-year contract with Yao after his endorsement contract with Nike expired, in order to achieve its marketing objective of 20 percent of market share in China, an estimated \$300 million, by 2008 (Testa, 2003).
- On February 12, 2004, the fast-food giant McDonald announced the signing of Yao Ming in a multi-year deal to be part of McDonald's global "I'm lovin' it" campaign (BDASports, 2004).

Apparently, “To Be Like Yao”, which is the slogan used by Gatorade, reflects what these companies are hoping to achieve in the market with Yao’s image. This can be seen in their statements. For instance, Larry Light, McDonald’s executive vice president and global chief marketing officer, said in a statement “Yao Ming personifies what the McDonald’s brand is all about -- a youthful, fun, dynamic spirit which connects to today’s customers and cultures” (BDASports, 2004). Similarly, Zhang Zhaoyang, an executive of Sohu.com, said he built on Yao’s image as “youthful, fad [sic], dynamic,

and self-aggressive”, an image he felt was synonymous with the image of Sohu (Chen, 2003). According to Ye Fengping, executive director at China Unicom, the reason for hiring Yao was because of his “self-confidence, energy, technical superiority, big figure and big name” (Tschang, 2003). Similarly, Apple and Visa advertisers said they sought out Yao’s “big” size, too (Pasick, 2003). This shows a common purpose of these companies in signing Yao was to use the cultural meanings associated with his image.

### Topic and Purpose

The process of linking the meanings of a celebrity’s image with those of consumer brands is the topic of this study. This includes two conditions: the cultural meanings of celebrity endorsers, and audiences’ interpretation of these meanings. McCracken (1989) found that the persuasiveness of a celebrity endorser depends upon the “cultural meanings” the celebrity can bring to a product. From a cultural perspective, his findings provide a clue to seek where Yao’s power as a persuasive endorser derives from. Despite marketers’ interest in gaining cultural relevance and value from Yao, consumers may “actively” interpret commercial portrayals of a celebrity’s image in fundamentally different ways (Wilson & Sparks, 1999). Rather than being influenced by an Olympic hero, this time, Chinese people are intensely influenced by a Chinese professional athlete who plays for both the Chinese National Basketball Association (CNBA) and an NBA team. Yao seems to be both a local hero with international fame and an international hero with domestic fame. Whereas the interpretation of Black celebrity athlete endorsements by Canadian youth has been assessed (Wilson & Sparks, 1999), this study focuses on Chinese young adults’ responses to a Chinese celebrity athlete.

The purpose of this study was to examine the cultural meanings attributed by Chinese young adults to Yao's image as portrayed in commercials. With this research, I wanted to figure out what contributes to Yao's marketing popularity from a cultural perspective and whether there were different cultural implications for Yao's image as portrayed in Chinese and western commercials when Chinese young adults explained them.

### Rationale and Potential Significance of the Study

A number of researchers have studied celebrity endorsements (Brooks & Harris, 1998) from the standpoint of their economic and social influence. Beginning as early as the 1920s and up to present day, from the culturally iconic baseball player Babe Ruth (Susman, 1984; Brooks, 1998) to Michael Jordan (Wilson & Sparks, 1996), a number of studies have focused on celebrity athlete endorsements with respect to cultural meaning (McCracken, 1989) or audience interpretations (Wilson & Sparks, 1996), in order to find out the effectiveness and social impact of celebrity endorsements. Based on the previous research, this study proposes to examine the cultural meanings of Yao, a new celebrity athlete who is performing an important role in influencing both the economic activity and social life of Chinese young adults. While marketers may derive brand image and awareness from Yao's image, this study will emphasize audience interpretations of the cultural meanings of Yao's endorsements.

A literature search indicates that such research on Chinese athletes is extremely scarce. Most studies that focus on celebrity athletes are in western countries where professional sports have been well developed. Although taken together the Chinese population is the biggest population in the world, sports marketing in China is still

developing and evolving (Geng, Burton, & Blakemore, 2002). This situation results in a lack of research on Chinese celebrity athletes. In the meantime, the globalization of sports marketing calls for further study on different celebrities with various cultural backgrounds in order to transcend national cultural “roadblocks such as time, space, language, relationships, power, risk, masculinity, femininity and many others” (Erdogan, 1999, p. 196). Rather than studying mass consumers who have exposure to Yao’s image, this study will focus on Chinese young adult consumers who tend to be more influenced by modern media than other Chinese consumers (Zhang & Shavitt, 2003).

A number of questions will be pursued in this study. For example, will Chinese young adults experience Yao the same ways that marketers anticipate? Or, do they think critically about his image? What do they think and why? Among their interpretations are there positive or negative with aspects of Yao’s image? Do they distinguish the meanings of Yao in western and Chinese endorsements respectively (e.g. “Asian” culture in western commercials, but western cultural such as the ‘NBA’ in Chinese commercials)? How might their interpretations offset marketers’ understandings of Yao’s value as an endorser?

Therefore, this study will make contributions to i) the explanation of Yao Ming’s marketing popularity from a cultural perspective, ii) the development and evolution of racially sensitive research on Chinese celebrity athlete endorsements, iii) practical knowledge about the effectiveness of endorsements.

#### Limitations of the Study

This study faces the same limitations as most audience research in that it:

can give only a partial view of the dynamics of message assimilation and use at any given time. Not only is it “incomplete” in terms of the range of interpretations that are possible within a given population, it also provides only a limited indication of what the assessed audience “will do next”, and no indication at all of what the audiences “could do” if given the chance (Hartley, 1994 c.f. Wilson & Sparks, 1996 p. 401)

Future studies may vary in terms of Yao’s performance, target markets in other locations, media value, or the marketing strategies of those brands.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study relies on two perspectives. One is the theory of celebrity endorsements (McGuire, 1985; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McCracken, 1989), and the other is audience research which focuses on how audiences “actively” interpret media texts according to different genres (Morley, 1981). My intention is to build on the descriptive and analytical power of extant models in the celebrity endorsement literature by taking account of how audiences actually respond to endorsement messages. I intend to trace Yao’s image from the standpoint of consumers who are media audiences as well as active message interpreters and recipients of these messages. Each framework will be discussed in this chapter.

#### Models of Celebrity Endorsement

Although the purpose of hiring a celebrity athlete is to draw more attention to the products, the endorsement may not have a positive impact on consumption (Brooks & Harris, 1989). McCracken (1989) identifies three accepted models for explaining positive effects of celebrity endorsements: the “source attractiveness” model, the “source credibility” model, and the “meaning transfer” model. Each in their own way contributes to our understanding of the conditions under which consumption may happen.

The source attractiveness model has its theoretical foundations in social psychology (McCracken, 1989; Brooks & Harris, 1998; McGuire, 1985). According to McGuire (1985), for the source attractiveness model to be effective, the source of the

information must be familiar, likable and or similar to consumers. Brooks and Harris (1998) explain “familiarity, likability, and similarity” in this way:

Exposure of the athlete through the media provides the familiarity component, likability depends upon physical attractiveness and behavior, and similarity requires that the consumer identify with the athlete in some manner. Thus, if we were to select an athlete to endorse a product, we would choose one who had wide exposure, one who was similar to the target market, and one whom the target market found attractive. According to McGuire’s model, this athlete would be a persuasive endorser for the product or brands (p. 41).

The source credibility model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) also rests on research in social psychology. It points out that the criteria for selecting an effective endorser depends upon the assumption that a positive impact on consumption will occur when consumers believe the endorser has expertise regarding the product and when they believe the endorser is trustworthy.

Although the source credibility and the source attractiveness models have been proved valid to some degree (Ohanian, 1990), McCracken (1989) criticized both models. According to McCracken, both source models overemphasize celebrities and neglect their correlation with products. This prevents us from understanding why some celebrity endorsements fail to sell products. For example, the source models cannot explain Friedman’s finding that some product categories were not compatible with celebrity categories. Second, the models do not provide sufficient evidence for us to distinguish the differences of appeal between different celebrities. In another words, the source models ignore the “cultural meanings” that make a celebrity attractive or credible. Based

on his criticism of the source models and his model of meaning movement in consumer culture (McCracken, 1988), McCracken (1989) developed the “meaning transfer” model to explain the celebrity endorsement process.

According to the “meaning transfer” model, the meanings that constitute the celebrity world are diverse and plentiful, and hence it is an oversimplification to use only dimensions of credibility or attractiveness to explain the efficacy of the celebrity endorsement. Rather than being credible or attractive, each celebrity is a unique combination representing distinguishable social and individual characteristics as McCracken (1989) suggests:

“The effectiveness of the endorser depends, in part, upon the meanings he or she brings to the endorsement process...Distinctions of status, class, gender, and age, as well as personality and lifestyle types, are represented in the pool of available celebrities, putting an extraordinarily various and subtle pallet of meanings at the disposal of the marketing system,” (p. 312)

These considerations provide a whole picture of the celebrity as an “interconnected set of meanings” (p. 313). Each cultural category may be reflected by certain subjects. For example, according to McCracken, Pierce Brosnan represents a classical and new wealthy man; maleness is embodied by Sylvester Stallone while femaleness by Loni Anderson; the man of wisdom is represented by David Brinkley, and so forth. When studying a celebrity, however, we should focus on the whole range of meanings rather than only one of these dimensions itself. For example, McCracken noted that it was the combination of Cher’s “hip, risk taking, irreverent, and liberated,” (p. 313) persona that contributed to her successful endorsement of consumer products. Furthermore,



McCracken's model emphasizes that via the endorsement, celebrities help to complete a process that transfers meaning from the culturally constituted world (McCracken, 1986) to the consumer in three steps. In the first step, the multiple roles of celebrities endow them with particular meanings in themselves. In the second step, meanings are transferred from the celebrities to the products via advertising and the endorsement process such that the products gain similar meanings as the celebrities; and in the third step, consumers acquire these meanings by purchasing and using the advertised products. During the whole process, the celebrity endorsement and related advertising and media appearance of the celebrity are the vehicles through which the meanings are transferred. According to McCracken, an effective endorsement ties the product to the meanings of the celebrity in a "successful transfer of meaning":

James Garner's endorsement of Mazda succeeds when a transfer takes place between his persona and the Mazda line. It succeeds when the qualities of maturity, Americanness, confidence, good humor, and a certain kind of maleness are made the qualities of the Mazda vehicle. The endorsement succeeds, in other words, when the properties of the man are made the properties of the car (p. 313).

McCracken's "meanings transfer" model provides a theoretical foundation to explain the marketing popularity of Yao Ming. Although Wang Zhizhi, the first Chinese basketball player to play in the NBA, was also a focus of the media and an attractive celebrity, he was not a marketing success. Similarly, Mengke Batere, the second NBA Chinese player who played for the Spurs when they won the championship in the 2002-2003 season, was not successful even though he was also regarded as credible to endorse sports products such as athletic shoes and apparel. What contributes to such different

marketing profiles for Yao and the other two who have apparently similar backgrounds? What contributes to Yao's distinct appeal to consumers and therefore to marketers as opposed to other NBA players? The "meaning transfer" model offers a possible approach to answer these questions. I assume that Yao is able to bring distinguishable "cultural meanings" which are "compelling" and "useful" to consumers. With these meanings he appears to have a positive impact on consumption of the products he speaks for. An examination of how consumers interpret his persona and his depictions in commercials will help to explain his unique appeal and success as an endorser.

#### Media, Audience, and the Encoding/Decoding Model

Hall (1973) developed an encoding/decoding model in an attempt to account for the processes of media production and active consumption. According to Hall, the process of communication must be seen as a whole, with "the moment of programme making at one end and the moment of audience reception at the other" (p. 17). In spite of the correlation of the two ends, Hall argued that the process of encoding and decoding was not perfectly symmetrical in that producers had varied significance of contexts to select from whereas readers had interrogative and expansive practices. The interconnection between them was contested. That is to say, viewers were seen to bring reflective frameworks to the messages and thus the encoded message was not necessarily decoded in correspondence to its producer's intentions (Hall, 1973, in Moores, 1993). Hall identified "preferred" readings as those cases in which dominant cultural signs were interpreted by readers in accordance with the intention of the encoder. Those readings that reflected the basic premise of the preferred readings, but were restricted in some

ways, were “negotiated readings,” while those readings that decoded messages in a contrary way were “oppositional”.

David Morley’s (1980) *The “Nationwide” Audience*, a study of a BBC news and current affairs show was regarded as “a landmark in the development of critical media theory and research” (Moore, 1993, p. 22). This research focused particularly on the context of media consumption, media genre, and viewer-media text interactions. By using ethnographic research methods, Morley (1980) confirmed Hall’s proposition that audiences were “active” recipients of encoded meanings and identities, while previous research was restricted to theorizing the impact of the media power of “passive” recipients. For instance, the film journal *Screen*, in the 1970s, ignored the audiences’ reflexivity in constructing meaning. According to *Screen* theory, spectators were positioned by the texts and manipulated with transparent encoded meanings (Morley, 1980).

Confined by Hall’s categories of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings, Morley felt that audience research should be drawn up exclusively for the purpose of measuring whether audiences agree, or disagree, or partly agree with encoded propositions of the text. It was required for audience research to link social placing within discursive and institutional social places, as he summarized in his study:

We cannot analyse communications separately from... the structures and divisions of the social formation. On the other hand, we must attempt to avoid a crude sociological reductionism which would take these factors to determine decoding practices in a mechanistic way (e.g. all working class people, as a direct result of their class position, will decode messages in manner X)... we need to investigate

the ways in which structural factors are articulated through discursive processes.

(Morley, 1981, a: 56. c.f. Moores, 1993, p. 21-22)

Morley's acknowledgement of genre variation led to his plan for a reformulated reception ethnography after the *Nationwide* Study. On this basis, researchers had to distinguish how different media material attracts different cultural groups in the first place, and go beyond the preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings adopted by selected readers when presented with a single text (Moores, 1993).

By translating our concerns from the framework of the decoding model into that of genre theory, we may be able to develop a model of text-audience relations which is more flexible, and of wider application... it would involve us in dealing more with the relevance/irrelevance and comprehension/incomprehension dimensions of decoding rather than being directly concerned with the acceptance or rejection of substantive ideological themes. (Morley, 1981, b: 10. c.f. Moores, 1993, p 30)

Based on audience theory and previous research, a study framework for audience research can be drawn up, consisting of questions such as "who likes what?", "why do they like it?", and "how is what they like valued?" (Moores, 1993) Another challenge of media reception analysis discussed by Morley was how to create a "natural" setting for studying groups. Morley noted that for audience research, the context provided for interviewing groups should not be too artificial, because reading the media is "routinely done in the private sphere" (Moores, 1993) such that an educational or work situation may raise differences. He further suggested that future research of media consumption be conducted in a household environment.

In this research I attempted to study Yao's fame and media audiences using natural settings. The distinct genre I focused on were Yao's commercials. The population was Chinese young adults who had been attending university in Vancouver for 1-4 years.

### Related Studies

#### Cultural Meanings and Celebrity Endorsement

Several studies that have focused on the cultural meanings of celebrities have conceptualized celebrities as "cultural icons". The concept of an "icon" refers to a celebrity who is recognized as a cultural signifier, and emphasizes his or her social role in leading cultural trends, fashion, or style. As Jones and Schumann (2000) state:

Great athletes, because of their prominence in our society, tend to play many different roles. They are not viewed simply as sports entertainers, but are often expected to engender strong values and morals that conform to societal and cultural norms. (p. 65)

In this way, celebrities convey cultural meanings and values that potentially link to their endorsement process, which in turn affects consumer purchasing.

Michael Jordan has been written about extensively and was a very successful celebrity endorser. He has been described as a "pre-eminent figure" (Kellner, 1996, p. 460) in the spectacle of media culture and a "well-established" (Wilson and Sparks, 1996, p. 399) brand pitchman in North America. According to Kellner (1996), Jordan is an embodiment of almost all the positive features of America. On the one hand, as a distinguishable basketball player, he signifies "grace, coordination, virtuosity, and all-around skill" (p. 460); on the other hand, as a natural person, he symbolizes the social values of "hard work, competitiveness, ambition, and success" (p. 324). These meanings

contribute to Jordan's persuasiveness as an endorser. Other than being a national hero and the symbol of America inside the country, Jordan disseminates American culture externally to other countries.

A study done by Andrews, Carrington, Jackson, and Mazur (1996) scrutinizes the implications of Jordan's image and the ways it is constructed in local culture, when international media and marketing programs invade New Zealand, Poland, and Great Britain. For example, in New Zealand, Jordan's image is pervasive through satellite television, commercials and the corroborative presence of Nike's promotions, and NBA programs. American cultural signs of "glamour, wealth, and overt commercialism" (p. 439) communicated by Jordan can be interpreted by New Zealand university students from Jordan. In Poland, Jordan was interpreted by youth as demonstrating the "American way of life" (p. 445), while, in Britain, his image was seen to express Blackness and Americanness.

While these studies emphasize the power of the media context to shape celebrities' images and the impact of such images on culture, another study by Hoecke, Hoecke, Knop, and Taks (1999) examined how the cultural meanings of the celebrity contribute to the effectiveness of the endorsement. Using surveys and interviews, Hoecke et al. examined the attitudes of consumers toward Vincent Rousseau, a nationally well-known athlete. In their study, they found that "a feeling of patriotism" (p. 23) cohered around Rousseau among the general public and they described the implications of the endorsements and the cultural meanings he conveyed. Vincent Rousseau was a Belgian top-class long distance runner (marathon world champion in 1993) sponsored by Nike. They characterized the public image of Vincent Rousseau as follows:

In general, Rousseau was described as a talented athlete (85.1%) who is praised for his perseverance (88.8%) and his simplicity (82.2%). Despite the low score for physical attractiveness (18.2%), more than half of the respondents (55.0%) perceive this man as friendly and trustworthy. On the other hand, almost half of the respondents (46.1%) stated Rousseau to be conservative, a characteristic which may be not in line with what Nike likes to carry. This may be an indication that Nike's objectives to sponsor Rousseau may be less image-oriented, notwithstanding the fact that his "real athlete image" does match Nike's image. (p. 26)

In addition, they found that 93.7% of 140 interviewees correctly identified the sponsorship between Nike and Rousseau. On the one hand, these findings indicated that overall Rousseau contributes to enhancing Nike's name to some extent, though he is not physically attractive. On the other hand, contrary to interviewees' perceptions of Nike as "modern," "fancy," "young," and "expensive" (p. 27), one of Rousseau's characteristics – "conservative" did not transfer to the product he speaks for, so his contribution to building Nike's image is "rather moderate" (Hoecke et al., 1999). Their study contributes to research on celebrity endorsement in two ways. First, it provides an approach to assess the effectiveness of the celebrity endorsement which examines the cultural meanings interpreted by consumers from the endorser's image. Second, it draws the conclusion that the categories of meanings of the celebrity may not all be perfectly consistent with the brand he or she endorses. These findings from a practical perspective indicated that studying the cultural meanings of an endorser's image is very important.

#### Audience Interpretation and Race

Wilson and Sparks' (1996) paper "*It's gotta be the shoes*": youth, race, and sneaker commercials is an important basis for my study. While previous studies at the time underlined the "control" and "power" of television on consumers, they emphasized the diversification in interpreting the media among different racial groups. By interviewing Black and non-Black Canadian youths in focus groups, they were able to examine how the youth reacted differently to the portrayal of Blacks in apparel commercials. They found that a well-established celebrity such as Michael Jordan possessed "cultural power" in influencing the consumption of Black youth. For non-black groups, however, such power was not as evident. Meanwhile the "symbolic power" among Black youth resulted in "style-copying" in the groups, while this tendency in the other groups was not as emphasized. These findings indicated that the youths' interpretations of the commercial messages, as a genre, varied according to their membership in different "interpretive communities" that were shaped by their racial experience, even though they were all basketball enthusiasts and enjoyed consuming basketball programming on television.

More importantly, their study not only demonstrated how the audiences interpreted the commercials but also provided a new perspective on text- and audience-based research which supported Morley's (1980) genre theory that audience research should consider readers located in distinct social locations, occupational status, and races, and so forth. In their study, the distinct genre was television commercials of athletic apparels that portrayed Black celebrities and the audience segments were two racially distinct "interpretive communities". The "interpretive communities" consisted of 15- to 19-year-old Black and non-Black male youths who routinely watched basketball



programs on television. These members were recruited from the same schools and typically were friends, the Black youth from Toronto, a city with a significant Black population and the non-Black youth from Vancouver, a city where the participants had little experience with Blacks. With this recruitment strategy, members in these two racially circumscribed “interpretive communities” had backgrounds that respectively comprised similar “cultural experiences, social location, and interests” (p. 409). Similarly located members of the focus groups interpreted the media in similar ways. Thus the use of the concept “interpretive community” in their research provided a foundation for helping to make sense of the interaction among the participants, social locations, interests, and “interpretive strategies”.

Their findings of how different groups interpret the media in different ways and their use of the “interpretive communities” forms the basis for my study. Following their example, the choice of targeted focus groups for my study emphasizes racial identity, in my case, within the Chinese community. Rather than examining the different reactions to the same endorsement between different audiences, my study will attempt to figure out meanings of the same image portrayed in different cultural contexts and the interpretation from a single “interpretive community”. Using the conception of “interpretive communities”, it would make sense that interpretation of cultural meanings of Yao’s image in commercials would be similar for members of groups that are “similarly located”. Postman, Nystrom, Strate, and Weingartner (1988) indicate that culture is a shared system of values by a group of people who do things in a similar way. Also, they suggest that such shared meaning depends on the media through which meaning may be shared. McCracken (1989) indicates that different consumers are constantly seeking

goods with useful meanings relating to their access to social meanings and cultural principles within the content of consumer culture. His “meaning transfer” model posits that cultural distinctions of celebrities are transferred to goods via the media, and such distinctions form the useful meanings that various consumers seek. On this basis, different groups are likely to interpret a celebrity such as Yao in different ways. Chinese characteristics logically endow Yao’s image with special features, and he represents a mixture of Chinese conventions and novel trends. In the eyes of westerners, he might be an oriental gentleman with the characteristics of traditional Chinese; from the standpoint of Chinese, on the other hand, his image may signify contemporary culture and consumer fads. As an NBA player, his image may also convey exotic meaning such as competitiveness, newness, and westernness, new meanings that are coveted by some Chinese young adults. Still, whether any cultural barriers with respect to racism or nationalism exist in his image as portrayed in Chinese and western commercials is worthy of examining. By studying Chinese young adults’ interpretations of his endorsements, and particularly by assessing the meanings that this group give to his various portrayals especially in Chinese and western cultural environments, a developing picture can be drawn concerning the scope of cultural meanings and interpretations, which will help to inform the meaning of international celebrity athletes in different national contexts.

Jones and Schumann (2000) examined racial images in advertisements in *Sports Illustrated magazine (SI)* from 1995 to 1998. SI is regarded as a leader in sports print journalism in the United States and images of Caucasian and African-American athletes

predominate in its stories with the result that other races do not get equivalent coverage.

The same was true of advertising:

The appearance of Asian and Hispanic athletes is almost nonexistent, particularly in the early years of *SI*. In all cases where an ad contained numerous athletes and mixed race groups, only two racial groups were represented, Caucasian and African-American athletes. In other words, African-American athletes, although sometimes used alone in advertising, also appeared in a large proportion of the ads where a Caucasian athlete was also present. (p.70)

These findings indicate an over-emphasis on Caucasian and African-American athletes in *SI*. However, the globalization of sports marketing calls for a better understanding of how athletes of other races including Japanese, Chinese, and Indian are performing in the international sports market. This study on Yao, therefore, will make a contribution to an understanding of Chinese sports culture and its relationship to consumer culture.

#### Research on Sports Marketing and Celebrity Endorsement in China

This study necessarily involves considerations of Chinese sports marketing, celebrity endorsement, and culture, including the characteristics of young adults in China. Each perspective will be discussed in this section. While related research is limited in China, the shortage of research increases the significance of this study.

#### Sports Marketing in China

Academic and practical research on sports marketing in China is still in its infancy. The primary reason for this is that sport was previously considered as part of governmental programs and has only started to become open to market forces during the last 10 years. While celebrity endorsements have emerged during this time along with the

development of the advertising industry, research on celebrity athlete endorsements are neither extensive nor profound. Still, several researchers have made important contributions in this area.

Geng, Burton, and Blakemore (2002) define the present time as a transition period through which sport in China is transiting from “an Olympic-driven model” to “a marketing-driven model” (p. 32). In their study, they disclose differences in sports culture between China and the West.

It is understandable that the sport-centered ideas practiced in China for many years may be unfamiliar to practitioners in the West. Winning Olympic events, combined with serving China with glory, have long been the outstanding value defining Chinese sport culture. When Western corporations become involved in sponsoring Chinese athletic events and properties, their capitalistic attitudes (i.e. economic profit motives) conflict with China’s distinct socialism (i.e. social profit motives). Sport organizations view sponsorship as an external resource to add to the value of Olympic success. Western corporations traditionally have seen sponsorship as a marketing vehicle to differentiate brands or organizations (p. 28).

This kind of sport culture influences not only the sports industry but also the public recognition of the industry, and thus partially contributes to the understanding of celebrity athlete endorsement. Unlike most companies in North America which tend to hire professional sport athletes to pitch their brands, most companies in China favor using Olympic gold medallists for endorsing their products (Tschang, 2003). For instance, Coca-Cola Co. paid millions of dollars to hire Fu Mingxia, a three time Olympic diving champion who is nicknamed “diving queen”, as spokeswoman for its Sprite soft drink

campaign in 2000. Moreover, these Olympic champions are recognized as heroes and have been emerging into the market of branding.

The female table tennis player Deng Yaping and female soccer player Sun Wen, nicknamed “Mr. Football,” (sic) have become icons in China. Deng has set up her own firm, Dengyaping Sports Goods Co., to promote sportswear and table tennis equipment (Schlevogt, 2000, p. 57)

The philosophy of most companies in hiring an Olympic hero is to pursue the “Olympic Halo effect.” This overemphasis on glory, however, has resulted in the occasional misuse of celebrity athletes. For an instance, Liu Xuan, a teenaged Olympic female gymnastics champion once spoke for “Liuyang River”, an alcohol brand. Neither traditional nor contemporary Chinese women are in the habit of drinking. The only link between these two subjects is the tradition of drinking alcohol to celebrate.

The Yao Ming phenomenon provides a good opportunity to study Chinese celebrity athlete endorsements. He is one of the most significant representatives of the “transition” period in Chinese sports and symbolizes the change from a state-owned to a marketing oriented system and from amateur to professional sport. For example, Yao’s participation in the NBA is a milestone for Chinese basketball that opens the gate to the world of marketing. “Yao’s team” of agents is the first professional group serving a Chinese athlete. This team consists of MBA and sports management professors and students from University of Chicago who are experts in sport business and systematically analyze Yao’s market trends and tailor promotional tactics for him.

#### Celebrity and Endorsement

The book *Celebrity and Advertising* written by Dabin Liu (2000) delineates the use of celebrity endorsement in China. In this book, he generalizes the predominant reasons that resulted in the win-loss of several celebrity endorsements and points out traditional cultural perceptions that govern a majority of consumers' sense of advertising. Values such as being "patriotic, responsible, loyal, brave, faithful, sincere, modest, and courteous" have been long recognized as unparalleled virtues, and as a result endorsements that have embodied these features have had positive impacts on consumption (Liu, 2000, p. 99). For example, Jackie Chan, a famous Hollywood action movie star, is believed to be brave, patriotic, proud, humorous, and modest; when BBK, a DVD manufacturer hired him, these meanings were transferred to the product and the endorsement was so successful that the sales of BBK saw a large increase (Liu, 2000 p. 80).

While Liu's study examined mass consumers' perception of celebrity endorsement, Zhang and Shavitt (2003) developed their research to focus on an 18-35 year old segment. Their findings indicate that "modernity" and "individualism" are positioned and promoted in the advertisements of the products targeting Chinese Gen-Xers and that the approach is consistent with the cultural values respected by this group. These findings may imply that young Chinese consumers have distinct appreciations of celebrity endorsement. However, because they conducted their research by using content analysis of advertisements in newspapers, magazines, and on television, their conclusions only reflect advertisers' marketing strategies and expectations. The reaction of audiences still needs further study.

#### Chinese Young Adults

The reason why my study focuses on Chinese young adults who are 18 to 25 years old is that this is the group for whom “cultural change is likely to be the most rapid and in which cultural expressions deviate more from those of mainstream China” (Zhang and Shavitt, 2003). Some scholars classify this demographic group as part of the X-Generation. For example, an article in *Time Asia* (2000) refers to Gen-Xers as those who were born between 1965-1982. Others identify this age group as the Y-Generation. For example, Li (2000), a member of the legislative council in Hong Kong, regards those who were born after 1980 as part of the Y-Generation. Regardless of the different names used to describe this demographic group, scholars generally agree on the traits shared by this age cohort. Li (2000) describes several features:

They are generally able to speak English and use information technology, as well as being at ease in a competitive multi-cultural environment. Born after 1980, they are still at school and university and with biggest impact on marketing as the children of baby boomers have enormous financial clout... First generation to grow up in a multi-cultural country making them more at ease with peers of different ethnicity. Technically adept, they are creating a global generation through their access to mass media and communication tools such as the Internet. Plenty of time to pursue their career goals - they are in no hurry. Their motto 'Don't stress' (Li, 2000)

Another article posted at the official website of the Chinese Embassy Nepal (2004) portrays this new generation in another way:

These postmodern people are mostly pragmatic, creative, strongly independent, self-reliant, and hard-working. They want desperately to believe in something, but

have come to distrust almost everything the modern world has deemed important.

Traditional notions of knowledge and learning are disdained and exotics are followed.

These features document several reasons why I have selected Chinese youth as the object of my study. First, they have an extensive exposure to mass media and advertising which influences their cultural conceptions (Zhang & Shavitt, 2003). Second, with the impact of so-called foreign culture 'exotics', they are becoming more culturally adapted to the combination of China and the West (Ong, 1998; Zhang & Shavitt, 2003). "Exotic culture" in Chinese refers to the meanings from outside China (such as from western countries) and does not specify certain meaning. Third, they are bilingual, highly educated, and they are the future of China (Time Asia, 2000; Li, 2000; Zhang & Shavitt, 2003).



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter summarizes how the study was designed and the two research methodologies that were used. The interpretive analysis component of the study was undertaken to provide a summary of Yao's representations in advertising endorsements. From this component, a representative selection of commercials was identified for the audience response portion of the study that focused on how groups of Chinese youth interpret the cultural meaning of Yao's image. The focus groups allowed a free conversation of the audience and provided insight into the attitudes of the members towards Yao Ming and his endorsements.

The research was carried out in two steps. Considerations of feasibility, availability of evidence, ethics and potential study obstacles will be discussed relating to the following two phases of my research

#### Phase #1 - Interpretive Analysis of Yao's Endorsements

Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1990) described interpretive analysis as a method used to depict and explain the content of advertisements. Advertising carries two levels of messages: "informational" messages which describe the characteristics of the products, and "transformational" messages that attempt to change the attitudes of consumers toward brands, consumption, lifestyles, and so on. The "informational" messages are visible on the surface of the text; the "transformational" messages are buried in the structure of the advertisements and discovering these messages requires a diligent search. Although "transferable messages play a more subtle role in an ad, they are very important because they reflect consumers' social distinctions such as gender, honour, power, and

those factors that McCracken (1989) regarded as “cultural meanings”. Interpretive analysis helps one to understand what an advertisement is about and the kind of influence it may exert on different people. In this way, it is a method which complements audience interpretations of a message.

According to Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1990), interpretive analysis allows one to study the “social cues” which penetrate the circulation of messages between persons and objects and thus provides insight towards, and a better understanding of, the advertisement. Using interpretive analysis, Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1990) demonstrated that visual advertisements could associate an unfamiliar activity with a familiar activity or social role. For example, an advertisement directed towards a female audience suggests that adding lead to gasoline is like a mother adding grated cheese to macaroni. They also demonstrated that advertising might not only bring new products to consumers, but also associate the products with consumer lifestyles. For example, an advertisement may suggest that a refined design leads to a more refined lifestyle. Such an advertisement may appeal to a consumer who wishes to give the impression of being of a higher social standing.

Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1990) also suggested that interpretive analysis of advertising could help us better understand the consumer culture. They noted that media and advertising played roles in managing symbols and meanings of consumer culture, because media-based messages convey information about products and create meanings which may shape consumption patterns and peoples’ sense of satisfaction.

The goal of interpretive analysis is to understand the communication dynamics and meanings of media texts. For example, in *Myths, Men, & Beer*, Postman, Nystrom,

Strate, and Weingartner (1988) analyzed 40 beer commercials for 15 brands and identified 14 distinct themes and narrative strategies in the commercials. The purpose of their research was to examine the cultural meanings of beer commercials and to estimate their effects on audiences.

For my study, by describing the narratives and themes for different advertisements for Yao Ming, I wanted to be able to account for how his identity was constituted and positioned. This would also provide a general idea about the cultural meanings of each ad that could be gained from examining the interplay of its visual and aural components, and would assist in identifying a representative selection of the ads for use in the focus groups.

When doing interpretive analysis, the researcher ends up relying on his/her own judgement about the cultural meaning of the texts, in this case, advertisements. Interpretive analysis can range in complexity from highly detailed assessments of the communication structure and form of texts to broader description of their contents and narrative. In order to avoid overemphasizing my own opinion, I elected to use a broad descriptive approach and to rely on the audience understandings of Yao Ming's image in order to provide a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the meanings of the ads. My analysis followed Leiss, Kline and Jhally's (1990) approach of providing a description of the ad's content that was sensitive to the social context and broad meaning of the ads.

### Phase #2 - Focus Groups

The use of focus groups in audience and cultural research is based on the understanding that this method can gain direct, natural, and interactive data from the dialogue of a homogenous group, as Kitzinger (2001) states:

“Group discussion is particularly appropriate when the interviewer has a series of open-ended questions and wishes to encourage research participants to explore the issues of importance to them in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities...also helps researchers tap into the many different forms of communication that people use in day-to-day interaction, including jokes, anecdotes, teasing and arguing.” (p. 21)

Neither survey methodology nor one-to-one interviews can generate group-related information of an equal quality as focus groups.

Some scholars have also noted that more critical comments can be generated by group work than by interviews (Kitzinger, 2001; Watts & Ebbutt, 1987). Focus group methods construct a comfortable setting so that participants can freely communicate. During “inter-personal communication” (Kitzinger, 2001), contradictions between the media and the audience can easily be exposed. Also, for audience research, “creative” and “reflexive” attitudes can be collected within a group setting. When media texts, such as the selected commercials featuring Yao, are shown to a focus group, a variety of discussions from a broad range of perspectives can be developed. With appropriate moderator direction, the participants can be encouraged to talk about potentially awkward subjects that are hard to reach in one-to-one interviews (Kitzinger, 1994). Such creativity and reflexivity enable the researcher to gather ‘natural’ opinions and information (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995).

#### Content of the Focus Group Guide (Appendix C)

The goal of a focus group guide is to give the focus group moderator a set of ordered and broadly stated topics to be used in directing conversation and discussions.

The design of focus group guide generally follows an “iterative” method which allows for progressive changes as more information is learned from focus group sessions over time. The focus group guide to this study was based on Wilson and Sparks’ (1996) research on youth responses to commercials. Questions taken from their study were supplemented by specific questions about the comparison between Yao Ming and other Chinese celebrities. The goal of these topics was to motivate conversation relating to the study questions.

#### The Commercial Viewing Questionnaire (Appendix D)

According to Morgan (1988), questionnaire research and focus group research are complementary sources and this allows initial, individual data to be augmented by data resulting from group interaction. A commercial viewing questionnaire was adapted from Wilson and Sparks (1996) to enrich the focus group data. The participants completed the questionnaire before the discussion portion so that this information was not influenced by the group interaction. Also, the participants’ interests in the topics of this study were measured with the questionnaire.

#### Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy was to recruit approximately 25-30 Chinese international students aged 18 - 25 year old who were studying in Vancouver. The goal was to develop 4-5 focus groups as it was felt that this number would achieve saturation the point at which nothing new would be learned by holding further groups. The recruitment criteria was that all participants should share similar interests in Yao as determined by two criteria: 1) whether they had watched an NBA game in the last year, because Yao was playing in the game, or 2) whether they had visited a website to read news about Yao in

the last year (see appendix 2). Each focus group was intended to be a mix of male and female students. Initially, the reasons for this mixture were: 1) As friends, they would be free to bring either male or female friends, 2) News reports indicated that Chinese females have similar interests in Yao Ming as Chinese males, 3) more importantly, this could provide an opportunity for the researcher to learn about and compare any differences between males and females when they interpret Yao's image. According to Statistics Canada (2001) the Chinese population in Vancouver is 342,665 which makes it the biggest visible minority community in the city. The population is not homogenous, however, and two Chinese could speak very different languages ("Cantonese" or "Mandarin") and have distinct cultural backgrounds. From this consideration, the criteria to select the sample in this study were a) Mandarin and English speaking, b) from mainland China, c) university students, d) aged 18 to 25, and e) interested in Yao Ming. With such criteria, sufficient homogeneity was structured into the groups so that they would be able to freely discuss Yao Ming. It was found in previous research that a homogeneous group provides participants a more comfortable setting socially for directed interaction to take place (Morgan, 1988; Wilson & Sparks 1996).

The decision to focus on 18 – 25 year olds is in line with previous findings that this segment is representative of Chinese youth who have lived through the switch from traditional to modern Chinese culture and the impact of exotic culture. They are also prime targets of the mass media (Zhang & Shavitt, 2003) and "frequently a target market for products that use athletes for endorsements" (Martin, 1996).

The number of focus groups was based on Kitzinger's suggestion that numbers of focus groups could vary according to the purpose of the project and available resources,

but that even “a few groups” could draw effective conclusions. Also, Wilson and Sparks (1996) and Morgan (1988) suggest that “3 to 4 groups are usually necessary for research attempting to find a groups’ perspective in a ‘relatively structured’ manner with a homogenous population.” (Wilson & Sparks, p. 411) Wilson and Sparks (1996) founded that 3 Black and 4 no-Black focus groups were sufficient for cataloguing differences in these two communities. On this basis, I decided that 5 focus groups of 4-6 individuals with a single population (Chinese young adults) were sufficient.

The number of participants per group was set at 4-6 persons who are familiar with one another. This again was in-keeping with Wilson and Sparks (1996) and Morgan (1988) who suggested using a small group to facilitate dialogue. Kitzinger also suggests that a group of 4 to 8 people is an ideal size. Smaller groups allow for more involvement by all participants and allow the researcher to more easily draw and control each individual’s attention. Jhally and Lewis’ (1992) study of audience responses to *The Cosby Show* and Wilson and Sparks’ (1996) study of youth interpretations of the portrayal of Black celebrity athletes in athletic apparel commercials used a maximum of 8 people who were familiar with one another in the group. By using people who know one another, the small group strategy avoids awkward conversation with unfamiliar participants.

### Recruiting Method

Based on the method used by Jhally and Lewis (1992), a ‘contacts and personal acquaintances’ approach (c.f. Wilson and Sparks 1996 p.412) to make the group homogeneous, this study recruited members from a student organization that had regular meetings and activities. The organization was located in Vancouver with approximately

200 members who were studying or working at the University of British Columbia or Simon Fraser University. The association frequently organized events and activities so as to enrich the members' lives in Vancouver; therefore, the members either were classmates, neighbours, team players, or colleagues, or were acquaintances.

The researcher had access to the organizations. First, he himself is a member of the organization. After he participated in several events he knew that there were 18-25 year old international student members in the association. Second, during the last year, the researcher worked as the representative of a company that sponsored Chinese New Year Galas for the association and thus had built a good relationship with the chairman and staff. Several individual staff members also showed their interests in the topic of Yao Ming. There was also a basketball club in the association, and this increased the opportunities to recruit participants interested in basketball and Yao Ming.

Two methods was identified for recruiting group members at the same time:

1. Method A. Focus groups were scheduled as a workshop of the association and an advertisement (see Appendix F) was posted on the organization's official website for a week. This method was ultimately unsuccessful, because there were no responses to the ad after one week.
2. Method B. The study adopted the "snowball" method (Wilson and Sparks 1996).

The researcher talked with the president of the association and he was very enthusiastic to help recruit participants.

### Data Collection

Considerations of running focus groups included the settings, the time, the facilitator, and the content of the sessions (Morgan, 1988; Kitzinger, 2001). The focus



group sessions were all conducted in the homes of participants, in order to make the participants feel comfortable. (Kitzinger, 2001). Participants sat in a semi-circle so that everyone was able to watch the commercials and this arrangement helped establish a good atmosphere for discussion (Kitzinger, 2001, p. 25).

The duration of the sessions was limited to 1 to 1.5 hours. Kitzinger (2001) Wilson and Sparks (1996), and Morgan (1988) refer to this as a reasonable period of time for participants to dedicate, and “not so long that attention would waiver from the topic” (Wilson and Sparks, 1996). The period of time over which sessions were conducted was one week (June 30, 2004 – July 8, 2004) and a session was conducted every other day with one day for conducting the session and one day for editing the data. This arrangement was very effective for transcribing the data from the group interviews, because it minimized confusing what happened in one session with another.

The researcher was the facilitator of the focus group sessions. The main reason for this decision was that the researcher had a similar background as the participants who were from mainland China, and he speaks English and Mandarin so that participants felt very comfortable in inviting him to their family and talking. A second reason was that as a member and having appeared at previous events, the researcher was acquainted to some extent with the participants and this added a familiar atmosphere to the discussion. A third reason was that the researcher was acquainted with the topic and had experience (I had experience organizing staff and clients meetings when I worked as an assistant manager of a hotel in China.) and with guiding the conversation of Chinese groups. A limitation might be that the researcher may bring his own attitudes to the discussion of Yao because of the researcher’s racial background and interests. In order to avoid this

potential bias, the researcher was careful not to address his personal attitude toward the topic and insured that his age was out of the range of the population being studied so that he did not represent the target group. Keeping this in mind, the researcher avoided using his own personal ideas to influence the focus group respondents.

The sessions were conducted using a focus group guide (see appendix C), in order to optimize use of the time spent, and to better direct and encourage discussion. The session started by welcoming the participants and introducing the topic of the study. Participants were advised they were under “no obligation to answer, participate, or continue participating”. The researcher then described the structure of the session before the ads viewing segment of the discussion.

After completing the ads viewing portion and filling out the questionnaire, the focus group discussion began. This part of the session started with general discussion (see appendix C) about what each participant saw during the commercials and which commercials they “liked most” and “liked least” (Wilson and Sparks, 1996). The participants were encouraged to refer to the commercial viewing questionnaire (see appendix E). In this way, the conversation began with individual thoughts, but under direction. With the researcher’s direction and probing, this led to discussions about the more specific topic areas outlined in the interview guide.

The focus group guide (appendix C) and the commercial viewing questionnaire (appendix E) were very effective in managing and directing discussions of the focus group. In sessions, some participants were very active to state their thinkings but others were quiet. In order to avoid the situation where “quiet” participants always agreed with active ones, the researcher specifically asked the “quiet” participants questions listed in

the interview guide or viewing questionnaire such as “What meanings does Yao Ming symbolize? Please use some specific words to describe these meanings” and “What do you like most about this commercial?” By doing this, everyone was encouraged to provide his or her own opinion in the discussions.

All sessions were audio-taped and observational data were written in field notes. The disadvantage of recording was that it was time-consuming to transcribe, but the advantages of audio recording was the emphasis on the field sense and that the researcher could get a permanent record of the discussion very conveniently with a portable recorder (Hammersley, & Atkinson, 1995). On this basis, when collecting the information, this study combined field-notes of participants’ behaviour and audio-recording of their conversation. All the data records were transcribed into a computer file according to their chronology immediately after the sessions were finished. Later, the transcription and field notes were catalogued and analyzed. This was in accordance with Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1995) suggestion:

(Transcription) enables the scientific worker to break up his subject-matter, so as to isolate and examine at his leisure its various component parts, and to recombine the facts when they have been thus released from all accustomed categories, in new and experimental groupings. (Webb & Webb, 1932, p. 83; c.f. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 193)

### Limitations

Potential problems of using focus group methods include how to ensure full participation (Belgrave, Zablotzky, & Guadagno, 2002), the potential chaos of the conversation (Wilson & Sparks, 1996; Morgan, 1988) and mutual influence among

participants (Belgrave, 2002; Wilson and Sparks, 1996; Morgan, 1988; Madriz, 1988). Two methods were used in this study to encourage attendance: one was a gift of two “free” long distance phone cards to participants; the other was the “snowball effect” which can bring together friends and people sharing the same interests. For the second issue “potential chaos”, an interview guide did help guide the sessions and enabled the researcher to stay focused on the topic and research purpose. Regarding the third issue, “mutual influence” (the participants would support others but not their own individual feelings, because of group pressure) (Wilson & Sparks, 1996) this study used a questionnaire (Appendix E) that was filled out after viewing the commercials and before discussion, and the participants were encouraged to use their own answers in their own discussion. Morgan’s (1988) and Wilson and Sparks’ research indicates that people are more likely to insist on what they have written down.

### Ethics

The proposed study received ethics approval from the University of British Columbia behavioural Sciences Screening Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects. (Appendix G)

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS AND ANALYSES

This chapter discusses the research process and findings from the interpretive analysis and focus groups. In the first portion, the advertisements viewed by the participants are described and interpreted (the process used in this analysis is described). The second portion categorizes findings from the focus groups into 5 sections and discusses each section in detail.

#### Interpretive Analysis

In order to provide appropriate commercials for audience-viewing, I searched commercials that portrayal Yao Ming's image and stored them with Windows Media Audio/Video format in my computer. Watching these commercials with Windows Media Player, I interpreted their contents and described the ads.

A total of 10 corporations with 11 well-known brands including Visa, Apple, Uperdeck, Pepsi (Pepsi-Cola and Gatorade), Reebok, Torrent, McDonald, Nike, China Unicom, and Sohu.com, have signed contracts with Yao since he joined the NBA (Nike's contract actually was signed before he joined and expired in October 2003). The methods used to obtain possible commercials that portray Yao Ming were checking the official websites of the NBA, the sponsors, and Yao Ming ([www.yaoming.net](http://www.yaoming.net)) and conducting a Google search using the phrase "Yao Ming commercials". Seven commercials of sponsors including Visa, Apple, Gatorade and Pepsi-Cola (China), and China Unicom (two) as well as of the NBA, and one billboard advertisement of Sohu.com were found and stored. For the rest of the sponsors, I sent a letter to each company on May 24 2004 to ask for the commercials for research purposes but I have not received any responses

since then. This might be because I only did one mail-out and with no follow-up when I requested the ads from these companies.

Based on the product categories as well as the content of the advertisements of these sponsors, the target segments of these brands appear to be young adults. From this standpoint, it is appropriate to focus this research on young adults' interpretations of Yao in these commercials. The following are descriptions of the commercials.

Apple Power Book (Big and Small): the scene takes place on a plane. Yao Ming ends up sitting next to Verne Troyer, the 2-foot, 8-inch actor most famous for playing Mini-Me in the *Austin Powers* series. Yao brings out a 12-inch screen Apple power book, and Verne brings out a 17-inch power book. Both Yao and Vern eye each other's machines enviously.

Visa (Super Bowl ad): the scene is in a New York souvenir store. Yao asks if he can write a check for the souvenir he wants to buy. The cashier girl says "Yo," and points towards the "No checks" sign. "Yao," says Yao, thinking she's mispronounced his name. She then calls the manager. ("Yo!") The exchange repeats. Confused, Yao finally leaves the store. In the final scene, Yogi Berra pops up in the store and also fails to grasp the meaning of "Yo"—"Yogi," he says.

Gatorade: the scene is at the home of a young boy. Famous sports players come to his front door asking his mother if "Jimmy can come out and play". First is Yao Ming who asks if Jimmy can play basketball with him. Then Derek Jeter and then Peyton Manning follow.

Pepsi-Cola China (Inspiration): there are 2 different scenes, one with Yao Ming playing basketball and the other with a famous music performer playing keyboards. The rhythm

of Yao's basketball dribbling gives inspiration to the musician to compose a lively song. The composer then abruptly ends the song and this makes Yao miss his shot. The final scene shows that Yao Ming finishes his Pepsi and crushes the can. The musician's empty Pepsi can crushes by itself and he lets out a big unexpected burp.

NBA (I Love this Game): the scene starts off with Yao Ming performing Tai Chi in front of some people. This scene then alternates with highlights of Yao's performance in NBA games. In one of the last scenes, a mascot who is following Yao's Tai Chi, loses his balance and falls. The scene ends with Yao tossing a towel over his shoulder and saying I love this game.

In these commercials, story telling is the main form of communication and Yao Ming is used to deliver messages. These commercials were later displayed to and discussed by focus groups in phase #2. Because outdoor advertising was not included as a genre in this study, a billboard advertisement for Sohu.com was not used. There were two reasons for selecting these 5 commercials as the viewing sample. First, the focus group interview would be too long if more than 5 commercials were used. Second, a sample of at least 2 Chinese and western commercials, was necessary in order to check for cultural differences.

### Focus Group Finding

A total of 26 participants were recruited, including 18 males and 8 females. One male participant left for an appointment during an interview session, but otherwise all group members participated for the entire session. Appendix A (Focus Groups Participants) shows the participants' ages, the number of months they have stayed in Vancouver, and how many participants were in each interview group. The sessions were

conducted in Mandarin, and transcriptions were first in Mandarin and then were translated into English. Some expressions were difficult to translate. For example, a feeling that was described as “shuang!” in Mandarin was very difficult to translate into English. The researcher consulted a Chinese woman who has lived in Canada for 11 years and she thought that “yeah!” was close although it did not 100% percent reflect the same feeling. Focus group sessions were tape-recorded and immediately transcribed to 5 files related to each focus group session. These files were stored on the researcher’s computer. Using Microsoft Word, the researcher listed the answers to each question in the discussion portion of the interview guide and identified thematic similarities and differences. In the meantime, participants’ attitudes that were not related to the questions were also listed and compared. By comparing and analyzing the transcripts, similarities and differences were identified and finally, categorized.

Findings from the focus group are summarized in 5 sections that encompass (1) Yao Ming’s positive image, (2) the benefits of Yao Ming’s image for the products he endorsed, (3) the special nature of the participants, (4) the differences between male and female participants’ interpretations of Yao Ming, and (5) media influences on Yao Ming and the participants. The first section catalogues the meanings obtained from Yao Ming’s image on three levels. First level meanings were general meanings that a celebrity possesses, second level meanings were his uniqueness that makes him different from others, and third level meanings were an intensive feeling of nationalism that derived, in part, from the special nature of the participants and how they identified with Yao. The second section notes that Yao Ming’s image has a positive impact on all products he endorsed, although the extent of the impact varies by participants and the products. The



third discusses how the special nature of the participants' location and social status as Chinese students in Canada contributes to their understandings of Yao Ming's image. The fourth describes how the attitudes towards Yao Ming between male and female participants were somewhat different even while all were positive. The final section describes how the media have influenced the participants' interpretations of Yao Ming's image. In quotes of group dialogues, M1, M2...refers to male participants and F1, F2... refers to female participants.

#### 1. "To Most Chinese, He Is Very Excellent, A Very Good Image": The Meanings Obtained From Yao Ming Are All Positive

Themes emerged from discussion surrounding Yao Ming's positive and heroic image in the commercials. Attitudes of Chinese young adults towards Yao Ming were positive, although they were not completely satisfied with all the commercials. The meanings interpreted by participants can be broken down into three levels. The first level is a composite of the positive meanings that the majority of celebrity athletes usually have, including "cool, famous, successful, powerful, actively performing, skillful, and self-confident". At the second level, Yao Ming's physical appearance of being "big" and his unique personality that most other celebrities do not have, together with his cultural background, contribute to his distinctness. These meanings include "healthy, enthusiastic, kind, gentle, simple and honest, humorous, and modest". At the third level, Yao Ming is a symbol of China, representing "the Great Wall," "China," "Chinese," as well as "Asia" to the sports industry and to the world. Key phrases that emerged in the discussions were that "Yao Ming is a celebrity athlete," "He is a unique celebrity," and "He represents China". Although few of the participants mentioned that Yao Ming might not have a

higher education background, participants consistently agreed that this would not have a negative impact on Yao Ming's image, because it is normal for the majority of Chinese athletes. In contrast with a higher-educated person, his lack of higher education even improves his image to some extent. The following three sub-sections summarize these three levels of the meanings regarding Yao Ming and the contrast between his education and his positive personality traits.

i. "He Is Powerful, Self-confident And Successful."

Usually, we describe celebrity athletes as leaders in their sports. The meanings achieved by Yao Ming share these characteristics of celebrity hood. While Yao Ming's actual performance on the court was not perfect, participants frequently used terms such as "top player" or "the best" to describe him and were confident about his future. A consistency that emerged within the group sessions is that Yao Ming has proved his potential and power on the basketball court and that he has succeeded in his personal life. Stated in terms of traditional jargon in China, Yao Ming is "a very good example worthwhile to study" and stated in modern terms, he is "an idol" of the youth generation in China. The participants described Yao Ming as an embodiment of a lot of valuable personality features. They found that Yao Ming had many strengths and that even in the brief scenes in the commercials they could relate to his image.

**Discussion of (the NBA "I love this game") (Group1) M1:** He's the best basketball player; I can feel his power when he is shooting and slam dunking the ball. He passed the defences very skilfully; this's kind of "using soft to beat hard" [M2 nods and responds] it's just the quintessence of Tai Chi. Shaq is the strongest in the NBA and Yao Ming is not as strong as Shaq, but he's the only person can fight with him...He knows how to use his strength to beat others' weakness, and he is good at taking this advantage

[M1 continues] yeah, the best players always know how to take advantage of their strengths, like Jordan... (all about praises of him), though Yao Ming might not be able to do those, he can use his height to keep him in a good situation

[M2 continues] he also made a very big progress and this's very quick. See the time he plays in the court becomes longer than before, and his slam dunks increase and become harder and harder. I can imagine what will happen in the future, no one can prevent him from slam dunking

[M1 nods and says] yes, I can imagine too [he pretends to slam dunk, smiles, and grunts] go away, Shaq!

**Discussion of (the Gatorade “Is it in you”)** (Group2) M5: He pulls down the hoop when he's dunking the ball, I can sense the power. He succeeds in improving his skills, [when speaking, he pretends slam dunking] he's a very good basketball player.

[M6 responds] ...Yao Ming here is the most important, because he first comes...He is young, “young” is the hope of tomorrow and young man has more energy than other ages' people.

[M5 continues] it also indicates that Yao Ming is at least as famous as the other two athletes, though he is new to the NBA and the media.

[M6 continues] I think he is even more famous than the other two, at least among Chinese, otherwise you would know them, right?

[M5 nods and second continues] and he is big, the biggest in the commercial.

ii. “He Is Healthy! Not Every Celebrity Has This Healthy...”

Discussions relating to Yao Ming's unique image and personality emphasized that not only was he a celebrity, but he also had characteristics that distinguished him from other celebrities. His most attractive and unique feature was his “huge” physical size and another was his “healthiness”. Based on a common word “healthy” (in Chinese, the word ‘healthy’ is usually used to describe a person's body in positive terms; also, it is used to describe a person's good spirit) which is also used to describe most celebrity athletes, Yao Ming's distinction was broadly explored and two deeper significances of “healthy”

were found through the discussion. One deeper significance derives from a belief in the change in the stereotype that “if a Chinese man is big he is awkward or with illness”. That is, Yao Ming is big but healthy. The other deeper significance related to the concept of “healthy” is that not only Yao Ming’s physical image, but also his spirit is healthy. Not every celebrity has this deeper level of the “healthy”. These two deeper connotations also contribute to Yao Ming’s uniqueness.

**Discussion of (Apple, “the Big and the Small”) (Group1)** F1: his arm was so long that he picked up his computer from the upper baggage shelf without standing up, I believe no one can do that. A very big man but very healthy image. [‘healthy’ M2 and M4 repeat and seems that they just get a word to describe Yao Ming and develop their dialog about ‘health’]

[M4 responds] yes, healthy! I’ve been thinking to find a perfect word like this. He is healthy, unlike other Chinese basketball player, they are tall but elephantine. Usually, a very tall Chinese man or women has disease or at least looks like having something wrong, but Yao Ming is not, he looks like a very normal person.

[M2 responds] I used not to watch Chinese basketball and not like China Men’s Basketball team, do you know why? Because we always lost the game...He is a hope, the future of our team (Chinese Men’s Basketball) will be promising.

[M3 smiles and responds] I didn’t like watching them (China Men’s Basketball) too, it was too boring. Yao Ming brings fresh air to the team, he saved China Basketball. Yao Ming proves that we can play (basketball) very well... (he laughs and some sparkles flash in his eyes then he continues) There will be a lot of Chinese players in the NBA, maybe, even some day, all Chinese control the games.

**Discussion of (Gatorade “Is it in you”) (Group3)** M7: when I see him slam dunking, I think this is a miracle. We all have been expected a Chinese basketball player can slam dunk like this. I heard that there was a Chinese basketball player, he was the tallest at his time, oh, what’s his name?

[M8 smiles and responds] Mu Tiezhu.

[M7 continues] yes, but he could not jump not to mention slam dunking. [he pretends elephantine dripping and shooting]

[M8 continues] sure, there was a lot of shame with bulk men in China. They reacted and moved slowly, they looked very big but were always related to unhealthy, I mean usually had some illness, and we called them “Sha Dage” (Foolish Big), because most of them grew unbalanced

In addition of the impression of his big but agile body, his spiritual world also contributes to his “healthy” image. Comparisons made between him and other celebrity athletes demonstrated that the audiences’ attitudes towards Yao Ming were not superficial but deep inside. The comparisons involve both western and Chinese celebrities. Some special characteristics emerged through the comparisons and proved that Yao Ming not only changed the stereotype towards “big” size Chinese, but also built a total new image for celebrities.

**Discussion continues (Gatorade “Is it in You”)** [M9 interrupts and leads the topic to another perspective] Remember the next scene, he smiles to the young boy with a little bit embarrassment? Seems that the hoop fell and he made something wrong, his smile is very humble, looks like a big boy smiling to his best friend.

[M8 smiles and responds] yeah. I remember that, and he says “oops!” sounds like he made a small mistake without purpose and he admitted his mistake...

[M9 continues] sure! This is so different from the last scene that the football player...his saying appears a celebrity’s arrogance.

[M10 nods and responds] this’s very common to a celebrity and this’s why Yao Ming is unique and different from others. Most of Chinese celebrities are arrogant, he isn’t.

[M8 & M9 nod and M8 responds] not only Chinese celebrities, but also western celebrities (are arrogant).

Other than merely interpreting the commercials, participants introduced a lot of meanings they obtained from the media. These meanings are discussed here to help better understand Yao Ming's image that was constructed in the minds of the audience.

**Discussion continues (Gatorade "is it in you?")** [M10 continues] I think he's healthy image in this way, not only because his appearance, but also because his humanness. He did a good job during "SARS" period in China, he donated and encouraged the society to struggle the plague together

[M8 nods and responds] most NBA players are "big brothers." Everybody (celebrity NBA players) has several rare cars and the huge houses, they spend money wastefully, but Yao Ming doesn't like this, his life very simple.

[M9 responds] ...Yao Ming has become the actual center of the team and the most important during the games, but he still can think of the team and sacrifice his own benefits.

[M10 continues] sure, this is so-called "humble" of a person, and as somebody says he brings fresh air to the NBA. I appreciate people's 'humble' [sic], especially of those who are famous.

[M7 continues] and Yao Ming is pure...this's uneasy for a celebrity. When a person becomes famous and rich, they will always forget to control themselves and likely to make mistakes, see Kobe these days...Yao Ming is healthier than others, he can control himself with clear-headed.

[M9 continues] ... see those Chinese pop singers, once they all were used to be very famous but are notorious now, because of their uncontrolled behaviours.

[M7 continues] yes, the modest, the simple and honest, and the pure make him different from other celebrities.

**Discussion (Visa Super Bowl)** (Group3) M7: He looks very kindly, when he's asking the clerk, he appears gentleness and patience.

[M8 nods and responds] yes, Yao Ming is a gentleman, his image is very shining, he's modest and even a bit quiet. But, when he does speak he always seems to say something funny, witty, or intelligent. Therefore, you always want to hear more.

[M9 responds] I think so, when he responds to the media or his teammates, he is very humorous, his attitude and demeanor are very different from most pro athletes and people in general, and this is very remarkable at his age. He seems like a genuine "good" guy or gentle giant and on top of that the guy can flat out play, this is the reason why his coach, teammates, and agents enjoy working with him very much.

[M8 responds] Very few Chinese celebrities have humour, especially for athletes, because they know how to play but don't know how to deal with the media and the camera. Yao Ming shows his intelligence not only when he's playing, but also before the camera, when he's in the commercials.

In order to examine distinct cultural meanings of Yao Ming, discussions involved the comparison between Yao Ming and the other two Chinese basketball players Wang Zhizhi and Barter who also play in the NBA. Their backgrounds are similar, because they all played for the China National Team and for the China National Basketball Association (CNBA). However, most participants could immediately identify differences between these players and Yao and they all emphasized such differences rather than focusing on their similar backgrounds. The comparisons commenced with the question about whether Wang or Barter could be substitute for Yao Ming in these commercials. Every respondents said no and explained that either their physical appearance or personalities and either their expertise of basketball or their social behavior were different. When comparing Yao Ming and few Chinese celebrity actors including Jackie Chan and Jack Li, his image was also unique and positive.

**Discussion of (the NBA "I love this game") (Group4) M11:** the situation would be different if Daba (Barter's Chinese nick name) in here. He is very strong and looks too hard, so how come he leads the group to playing Tai-Chi, it'll be inconsistent if he's in. Yao Ming's body isn't like him and his face looks a little

soft than Daba's so that it looks very smooth when he leads to playing Tai-Chi (in NBA commercial).

[M12 nods and smiles] actually Daba's face looks not like a Chinese, if he's in, few people would know this is in China [M11 & M12 nod and smile]

[M11 continues] it's true that Bartere is the first one who gets the Championship Ring of the NBA, and Wang Zhizhi is the first Chinese player came to the NBA, but Yao Ming is playing better than them, you can't see the other two playing or it's very rare to see them in the games, if using the other two in the Gatorade, I don't think their slam-dunking would be as good as Yao Ming's.

[M12 continues] not only their skill are different, but their reputation are different. Once Wang Zhizhi became the focus of the media, when he was selected by the NBA, but his reputation quickly went down.

[M11 responds] yes, I know this, because he didn't go back to serve for China National Team. He only considers himself, this's a kind of selfish. Yao Ming is not, soon after his playing at the NBA seasons, he go back to China and begun his training program, he is not selfish, he still play for Chinese National Basketball, he cares about China.

[M13 continues] Yao Ming does also consider the society, I think his image is the best among these three.

[M12 continues] Yao Ming's the only perfect one fit with Mini Me in Apple, the other two are not as big as him and then the comparison would not be that apparent.

[M11 second continues] Yes Jack Chan and Jack Li are very famous but that are not that big, [all participants smile] how come they fit to in these commercials? And how come they slam dunk? With KongFu? [all laugh]

[M13 responds] if they're in, you'll think they're acting and it's not real, but Yao Ming isn't an actor, so it's very true when you see the commercials

iii. "I Feel Comfortable, I Am Proud Of Him, And When I Saw Him In The Commercials Or NBA Games, Whatever, The Feeling Is So Great Just Like "Yeah!": Chinese Nationalism



A respondent made the above statement during the discussion portion of a session. When he stated this, the other three nodded and agreed with their thumbs up and this statement gained consistent confirmation and evoked participants' praise of Yao Ming. While this session was characterized by their pride in a national hero, the other sessions also demonstrated intense feelings of nationalism. Also, the feeling that Yao Ming is a Chinese national hero with international prestige guided the focus groups to discuss the third level of the meanings they obtained from Yao Ming. This feeling went throughout the sessions from the beginning to the end and emphasized that Yao Ming is a "Chinese". Every respondent recognized that Yao Ming symbolized "China" and "Chinese", he represents the virtue of Chinese, and he is one of the idols of young adults. The recognition that Yao Ming symbolizes China and Chinese people was consistently accepted by all focus groups. This symbolization was not merely a part of Yao Ming's personality, but a combination of several aspects of his broader persona including his name, his facial appearance, his posture, his thin body, his modest smile, and his perseverance. The following statements were typically made by most respondents within all groups.

**Discussion of (the NBA "I love this game") (Group4)** M14: this is really good, I like it very much. In that commercial, Yao Ming is leading the group to playing Tai-Chi and other western people are all following him. He is a 'Chinese' and Tai-Chi is one of the most popular and traditional sport item in China. These two character represent China, Chinese, and oriental culture. I like the feeling that a Chinese leading others...[M15 & M16 smile and nod]  
[M14 continues] Uh...I am not sure if all others are westerns and even don't pay attention to them, I don't care, but I know one thing that Yao Ming is standing in the front and he is the leader. (The actual background in the video was a little blurred so that it was difficult to distinguish who stood behind Yao Ming and

followed him playing Tai-Chi. Only a few of those followers can be identified as western people.)

[M15 nods and pretends Tai-Chi] He is the only Asian person for NBA commercial. This is very rare, most of others are all American (referring to NBA commercials of “I love this game”)

[M16 smiles and pretends Tai-Chi too] Both Yao Ming and Tai-Chi are oriental symbols. They make me remember Asia and our country. The commercial impresses me that the NBA does not only belong to American, but also belong to Chinese.

**Discussion of (Apple “The Big And The Small”) (Group5)** M17: his looking and smile are typical Chinese style, his modesty in the basketball court reflects Chinese virtue.

[M18 smiles and responds] he also reflects Chinese wisdom, Chinese invented the earliest computer – abacus, right? [others all smile] and a Chinese man uses the Apple, others must use Apple, right? [all smile]

**Discussion of (Gatorade Is it in you)** F8: when he’s asking if Jimmy can play, his characteristics is extreme Chinese style, kindly and polite.

**Discussion of (Visa Super Bowl)** (Group2) M5: It’s so great, I love it. To be honest, I can’t totally understand what the commercial is talking about, but I think it’s about a Chinese tourist shopping in the U.S. Yao Ming is the biggest and tallest in all the scenes, and when he’s holding the Statue of Liberty in his hand, the feeling is so great.

[M6 one with doubt eyes] is it the Statue of Liberty? I didn’t realize that, I just think it’s a souvenir,

[M5 continues] Yao Ming is a Chinese and the Statue of Liberty symbolizes the U.S. America is in a Chinese hand. See, we can handle America.

[This comment gained a lot of favorable laughter; the other three all agreed and looked refreshly. M6 responses] the cashier, the manger, and the other two customers are all looking up to Yao Ming. He is big and tall, China is big too.

[M5 responds] he is the first Chinese who attend the NBA All Star game and with a big volume of votes, this breaks the NBA record in history. This feeling is so

great. As my dad told me he got the same feeling when China gained the first gold medal in Olympics...I can remember the All Star game, when Yao Ming running out, I heard the applauses through out the whole court, the feeling is excellent, he brings honor to Chinese

While not all of the participants have feelings of patriotism as deep as these respondents, the fact that Yao Ming is "Chinese" was frequently mentioned in all the group sessions. The respondents described Yao Ming's image as oriental in both the western and Chinese commercials and no distinctly western messages were gained from Yao Ming's image in these commercials. The meanings were positive and supported by these respondents. These findings demonstrated that Yao Ming delivered the messages that can at least draw attention from Chinese audiences. That is, Chinese audiences would have interest in watching a commercial with Yao Ming. When the discussion related to the question of whether there are differences in using a western celebrity in the commercial, answers were affirmative. The respondents indicated that pervasive western celebrities cannot draw their attentions but it is different if Yao Ming is in the commercial.

(Group1) F1: It doesn't make sense to me (if a black or white athlete were substituted for Yao Ming in the commercial). There is no correlation between a white or a black star and us.

F2: He's a Chinese, so I can get some native feeling from the commercial. If I saw a normal commercial with the white or the black athletes in the TV, I would switch the channel to watch other programs, but if Yao Ming was in the commercial, I would watch it and at least say 'see a Chinese'.

M2: I couldn't get much feelings from those commercials (portrayals of white or black athletes), because it is very common as what they (commercials) usually did (in north America).

[the other three nod and M1 responds] yes, I feel the same way. A very tall Chinese guy stands among western people, this is really attractive.

M3: I will watch that if there is a Chinese in a commercial, but sometimes it is hard to distinguish a Chinese, Korean, or Japanese in the commercial. Yao Ming is unique, I can recognize him at once.

M1: Even his name, 'Yao Ming' is easy to call. My local friends can say these two characters very clearly, it's heard that NBA fans all can call his Chinese name.

## 2. "I Went To Apple Shop After I Saw That Commercial": Yao Ming's Impacts On The Products He Endorses Are Positive

The discussions generally shared that the participants thought Yao Ming had a positive impact on the products he endorsed. The extent of this varied among participants, with some showing more interest in the products Yao Ming endorsed than others and describing how the endorsement actually influenced their purchases. Others noted that Yao Ming possessed meanings and status that could improve the image of the products, though they had not yet consumed the products. The participants discussed most of the products endorsed by Yao Ming regardless of whether the commercials were viewed or not through the sessions. Also, the participants discussed whether Yao Ming fit with other products besides those he endorsed.

### "See, What's This?"

Either on purpose or by coincidence, one participant took a product Yao Ming endorsed along with him and showed it in the session. This action resulted in a lot of discussion and demonstrated peoples' loyalty to the products Yao Ming endorses. The following quotes show that Yao Ming has positive impacts on the image of the products and the consumption of the product.

**Discussion of (Gatorade “Is it in you”)** (Group4) M11: I never know “is it in you?” before, but now, when I drink it during the games, it (the slogan) sometimes can emerge in my mind.

[M12 looks like getting something and continues] yes, I got the same feeling, but the difference is the colorful sweat on Yao Ming’s forehead. [he points on his forehead and pretends to wipe up the sweat from his forehead] See! what’s this! [when saying, he opens his bag and takes out a bottle of green Gatorade] I’ll go to play basketball after our conversation

[M11 smiles and responds] you’re very loyal, but it’s good for you. How about your teammates, are they drinking Gatorade too?

[M12 responds] sometimes, not everybody, but I like it and take one every time. It’s really helpful...one day I can pull down the hoop [he pretends slam dunking]

[M13 seems to be very eager to say] hey, do you think so [he asks M11 and gets the answer “yes” from him] I never seen this commercial before, you know I don’t have TV, but I wanna try it now.

**Discussion of (Apple “the Big and the Small”)** M5: This made a deep impression on my mind. Yao Ming is so big but he is using a small notebook, this is very impressive. When I saw him using the Apple power book, I thought this must be suitable for me.

[M6 nods and smiles] sure it’s really impressive... he and Mini Me represents different segments of consumers. Yao Ming’s distinction—his large size reflects that Apple can satisfy different requirements.

[M5 respondent nods and continues] absolutely right. I wanted to buy an Apple after watching this commercial so I went to the shop to try it, just like what they are in the commercial, the design, the quality and everything, I also tried the one that Yao Ming uses in the commercial, the 14 inches power-book, it was very cute. Unfortunately, [he smiles] the price was too high, I can’t afford it at the moment, and so I had to hold my idea. But if I have enough money in the future, I will buy an Apple for sure.

Not all the participants said that they purchased these three products only because of the commercials, and some of the participants had purchased the other two products

Visa credit card and Pepsi-Cola, because of Yao Ming featured in the commercial.

However, the participants confirmed that he brings positive messages to the products and that they were likely to consume them in the future.

**Discussion of (Pepsi-Cola China)** (Group4) M14: To be honest, I haven't drunk Pepsi-Cola because of this commercial, or it's hard to see, because I've never seen it before, but I really like this commercial. For me, there's no big difference between Coke and Pepsi, I buy when which is on sale [he smiles], I must say I'll be able to remember this commercial and Yao Ming when I go shopping and see Pepsi-Cola. Maybe, I'll think about it.

[M15 responds] I've not seen this either, but I know it from the news through the Internet, I like it, do you know these two persons didn't see each other when the commercial was done. I think Yao Ming reflects the "young" of Pepsi, because Coke is older than Pepsi, and I remember that you can find Coke most places, but not so many stores sell Pepsi in China, because it went to China later than did Coke (this is true, but Pepsi tried to increase its coverage in stores as much as Coke, and it hires a lot of Chinese pop stars as spokespersons) [then he smiles] but I first drunk Coke in China and later favored its taste. Pepsi's taste is a little different

[M16 responds] yes, I think their tastes are different, actually I like Coke the same reason as you - first drinking Coke, but I'll probably try more Pepsi because Yao Ming likes it, and this is the first time I see this commercial.

**Discussion of (Visa Super Bowl)** (Group1) M1: I don't totally understand the commercial [smiles with a little embarrassment] [M2 smiles and responds] neither do I.

[M1 continues] Seems that Yao Ming can't buy the souvenir without Visa card, but why doesn't he get one if the credit card is so important to him. I'm a little confused, if it says Yao Ming using Visa, I would think, but any way, it seems that the Visa is "bigger" than Yao Ming

[M2 nods and continues] sure a little confused. To my point of view, even Yao Ming, such a famous and important celebrity can't shop without Visa, not to

mention us very common people, [he laughs and continues] hurry up! Get your Visa credit card [the participants all are laughing].

“I Would Like To See Yao Ming As McDonalds Uncle...”

In addition to the five products featured in the commercials that were viewed through the sessions, discussions also involved other products endorsed by Yao Ming including McDonalds, Reebok, Sohu.com, and China Unicom. Although not every one really showed brand loyalty and the tendency to purchase these products, the participants all confirmed that Yao Ming’s image has positive impact on the products and the meanings from him matched most of these products. These matched meanings included all three levels of cultural meanings discussed in the first section involving his physical image, his distinctness, and nationalism. Still, his “big” size, his “health”, and his symbolizing China were significant features and attracted a lot of attention from respondents. When they discussed these, the conversations were always able to smoothly develop in each focus group and the topics seemed to be endless. However, the other products he endorsed such as Uperdeck and Sorrent were ignored by all participants.

[It is a coincidence that F5 and M10 in Group3 state that Yao Ming can represent McDonalds] [F5 responds] He’s no problem for fast food. I can imagine that he is acting as the McDonalds Uncle (the Mascot) with red hair, very gentle and very kindly delivering meals to kids. Does he speak for McDonalds?

[M10 is saying at the same time]The McDonalds Uncle, I can imagine this, his smile perfectly fits to be the McDonalds Uncle. I would like to meet him in McDonalds, and I think kids will love him.

[According to their answers to the question whether Yao Ming can speak for fast food, the facilitator further asked them with the question] he’s speaking for McDonalds now, however, we all know that fast food is junk food, do you think it is inconsistent to use Yao Ming’s “healthy image” and the “unhealthy feelings” of fast food?

[F5 quickly responds] it's just because Yao Ming gives us a healthy image. In addition, I would like to see him acting as the clown with his simple and honest smile in McDonalds.

[M10 also immediately reacts and debates] there're no conflicts between them Yao Ming's such a healthy image that will be able to add "health" to McDonalds. Now fast food is trying to change its stereotype from junk food to healthy food, some new food is fresh so Yao Ming just can prove McDonalds' attempt.[F5 and M7 nod and smile]

[M10 continues] and Yao Ming's smile is very naïve. It'll be a very lovely image if he's dressing in the McDonalds Uncle

[M8 nods and interrupts] He is actually delivering meals to kids in McDonalds somewhere in China.

[M10 and F5 are very surprised] really? Did you see him?

[M8 answers] no, I know this from the Internet, [in spite of this answer, the previous M10 and F5 both smile and seem to be very happy about that their expectation is the fact]

McDonalds signed an endorsement contract in February 2004 and Yao Ming would be used in its "I lovin it!" campaign in China. The discussion disclosed respondents' attitudes toward Yao Ming and McDonalds. Although not all of them had known the relationship between them, the participants could indicate that meanings from Yao Ming were consistent with what McDonalds expected. These meanings included his healthy image and his personality traits such as simple and honest, gentle and kindly, as well as his smile. Moreover, the participants described that these characteristics would enable Yao Ming to fit in acting as the Mascot – McDonalds Uncle (this is the nick name of McDonalds' Mascot in China rather than Ronald McDonald).

When the participants questioned whether Yao Ming fit with any sports brands, the answers were affirmative. While not every respondent knew the brand that Yao Ming



endorsed, most of them would mention either Reebok or Nike. Reebok currently has the endorsement contract with Yao Ming while Nike sponsored him before October 2003. Yao Ming's expertise as an athlete and his size were considered to match with the meanings of sports brands.

(Group 1) F1: I'm not sure it's Reebok or Nike, but I remember it's one of them. Yao Ming's an athlete and perfect to the sports apparels or shoes.

[M1 nods and responds] yes, I would choose the brand he endorsed...feet types between Chinese and westerners' are different, ours are little bit wider, so [he smiles] if the shoes can fit to Yao Ming they must be fitting to me.

[M2 smiles and responds] Yao Ming is speaking for Reebok, I got to know this from the Internet, but I've never seen its commercial.

[F1 respondent looks getting a hint and responds] he used to speak for Nike when he's in Shanghai Shark, but seems something happened between them, then Reebok came in. [the other two are nodding]

[M2 respondent continues] actually, I didn't know a lot of Reebok in the past, Nike seems to be the best sports brand in China...I got to know Reebok when I knew that Yao Ming spoke for it, if I need one more shoes, I will be probably trying a pair of Reebok shoes.

(group 2) M5: Yao Ming is for Reebok, I read the news through the Internet, and he used to speak for Nike. He is so powerful in the basketball court that he can provide good suggestion on basketball shoes and related products.

[M6 nods and responds] Reebok and Nike both are big name of sports brands, Yao Ming is fitting very well with these brands, all involve sports, all famous, he is sports master, absolutely fitting in sports products

However, when the participants were asked about the Internet and Yao Ming, only a few of them agreed that Yao Ming would be able to improve its image. Therefore, the fact that Yao Ming was representing Sohu.com, one of the largest IPOs in China, was neglected. Respondents doubted whether Yao Ming had spoken or would speak for it,

because they thought that there were too few links between them. Also, the participants ignored that Yao Ming spoke for China Unicom, a telecommunication company

(Group5) M14: I've no idea about Yao Ming and the Internet, but how come he can speak for an Internet brand, is there any relation between them?

[M15 states] I don't know either. I don't think Yao Ming's uniqueness or big size can reflect the feature of the website, it's no sense for the website to hire him, but if a small website that no one knows hire him, may let people know it soon.

[M14 continues] if there is a relation, I think is the simple. Yao Ming doesn't get much education, he is just with elementary or secondary school level [with hesitant tone], Chinese athletes all this level, he can surf the internet, may be because the internet is easy to use [he smiles].

In addition to the brands that Yao Ming had already represented, several product categories were discussed according to the match up between Yao Ming and the products in the sessions. The respondents had preference for the categories that included vehicles, nutrition food, travel services and so on.

(Group 3) M10: I would like to buy the car that Yao Ming is driving. [M10 is very tall and big, though he is not that as tall as Yao Ming]

[M7 responses] he is driving BMW in America, a very nice car.

[M10 continues] I know, but I can't afford that, I like it very much, not only because it is BMW, but because if Yao Ming can drive it, I must feel comfortable seating in there.

[M7 laughs and continues] I think so, there must be much more space than other cars, I like this too. But I think I can't afford that, if Yao Ming speaks for it, it must be expensive, I guess.

F5:I would like to select the airline, if Yao Ming takes it, I mean if he chooses it. It's so crowd in the airplane, very uncomfortable for a long trip, from Canada to China, 10 hours flying.

[M10 nods and responds] he is big, so the airplane must be very comfortable for us, if he can sit in it.

F6: I would like to buy the male products for him, if Yao Ming would represent. [she smiles and states, pointing to M9 seating behind her with her finger, the situation shows that they are a couple]

[Ya~, M7 and M8 laugh and M7 responds] what male products?

[F6 continues] I mean nutrition food or healthy food products.

[M9 seating beside the girl responds] en~, I would use that if he uses. I am not kidding. He must eat something different.

[M7 responds] sounds reasonable. I guess so, see Chinese men athletes, when they compete in the games that are very rough, they are not good, so I think the food that Yao Ming eats in the U.S. is different from that in China, otherwise, he can't play for such long time.

### 3. "I've Been Living In Vancouver For A Year, If In China, I May Feel Different" The Special Nature Of The Participants

The uniqueness of the identities and circumstances of the participants emerged from the discussions. The participants were all Chinese international students who had been studying abroad and living in Vancouver for more than two years, according to the information they provided on the individual biographical survey. In recent years, they had spent most of their time in Vancouver, but some had spent one or two months in China during the holidays. Because the cost of the air ticket was expensive and the time in the air was long they flew to China not so often and hence spent most of their time in Vancouver with the feeling of being far away from home. Frequently, the respondents noted that their feelings towards a Chinese celebrity were intense because they were living abroad and the feelings would be different if they were in China.

**Discussion of (the NBA "I love this game")** (Group3) M7: it's a little special today, I mean the feeling. I watched this commercial in China last Spring Festival, I felt interested at that moment, but today am different. It's hard to say, it makes me feel very familiar and close. I don't know why, maybe because I didn't go

back to China this Spring Festival, and I even thought if this commercial could be seen in North America, it would have a big impact.

[he continues] I've been living here more than a year without going back to China, this is the longest time, before, and I went back to China twice a year. It's quite different when I saw a Yao Ming in Big and Small, actually I watched it thoroughly every time when I saw it, pretty interesting and enjoyable, and I never watched a commercial of Chinese celebrity so enjoyable like this in China [F5 smiles and responds] me either. It feels just so so when a Chinese celebrity appears in commercials on the screen when I was in China, even a "Da Wan'er" (very famous celebrity). Here is different, when I saw Yao Ming in, I would like to finish it.

[M7 continues] sure, same as the movie, I never saw Jack Chan's movie in English, and never thought I would be interested in it before coming here, but actually it delighted me a lot when I watched TV here. When in China, if a foreign celebrity in Chinese commercials...

[F5 smiles and interrupts] it would be very attractive [M7 nods and smiles] right! [F6 responds] It has a lot of fun when watching Yao Ming in commercials here in Vancouver, as well as today, it's very interesting. It must be different if I am in China, it doesn't matter for me who is in commercials or it's less important. I am willing to see something with Chinese style or get to know something about China when I am living here.

[F5 nods and responds] you're right. I was awake the whole night to wait for watching Chunjiewanhui (Spring Festival Celebration that is hold by China Central Television every New Year EVE) through the Internet this year, because I didn't go back to China, but when I was at home last year, even by the TV, I'd not much interests.

[the others nods and smiles with confirmative impression and M7 continues] yes, some Chinese movies and series as well, myself and my friends often take some DVDs of Chinese series back, we exchange and enjoy those series very much, but we didn't watch those in China

[F5 respondent nods and continues] so I am thinking it must be different if letting me watch these commercials in China, I would feel it's interesting, but not as intense as when I am here. I must say I enjoy watching these commercials, every time if one of them appeared on the screen, I always finished watching it, but for other commercials I always switched to another channel  
[the others smiles and nods and M9 responds] me too, I always skipped other commercials.

#### 4. "Boys Like Basketball Or Sport, But We (Girls) Like Pop Stars...": Differences in Male and Female Interest In Yao Ming.

At least one female participated in each focus group. This confirmed the validity of using a mixed gender strategy to recruit participants, since it facilitated participation by allowing prospects to bring either male or female friends to join the group sessions using the snowball method. Because they all were good friends, the female participants were very forthcoming and felt free to express their own opinions and even sometimes they talked more than male participants. Frankly, the female participants' attitudes towards Yao Ming were also supportive and they thought that his image was very positive with very similar meanings as male respondents. The meanings they interpreted also included his physical appearance, the distinctness of his personality, and his being a national hero. Concerning his influence on consumption, female and male respondents were different to some extent as demonstrated in the following dialogue.

**Discussion of (Pepsi-Cola) (Group1) F1 :** Zhou Jielun! (the musician in Pepsi's commercial, he is from Taiwan and very popular in main-land China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) [when viewing the commercial, a girl bolts out the name, she smiles and looks very excited]  
[F2 nods and smiles] Wow~, really cool! [male participants turn their heads and stare at them, M1 responds] hey, Misses, watch Yao Ming, please. [two girls are smiling and look at each other, F1 grimaces to M1]

[when discussing the commercial, F1 responds] My favorite is Coke not Pepsi, so I won't buy Pepsi because of Yao Ming, but if I buy it, maybe because of Zhou Jielun.

[F2 smiles and responses] me too, I like pop star more than celebrity athletes. Zhou Jielun attracts me more than Yao Ming in this commercial, but it's not to say that Yao Ming doesn't reflect anything here. I still think Yao Ming is very good man and reflects Pepsi-Cola's young and vitality.

[F1 continues] I always relate Yao Ming to sport or basketball, but I'd like to go to watch a concert of singers from China or Hong Kong rather than spend money seeing NBA games. Zhou Jielun in the commercial gives me surprise and happy, the feeling of Yao Ming is just famous athlete. I think Yao Ming there represents young and enthusiastic and Zhou Jielun does so either. I must say I can remember the commercial most because of Zhou Jielun.

[Group2, F3 states] I like sport, though I am not exercising very often. I watch most of sports programs, including soccer, basketball, volleyball, and tennis.

[M5 seats besides her smiles and responds] she even watches more sport than me, I usually choose those games between very famous teams, such as Lakers, Nets, and Rockets because of Yao Ming, but she wants to watch every game that was broadcasted [others smiles and nods, look they know this]

[F3 continues] I enjoy watching Yao Ming in the basketball court; he is the only Chinese man who can play in the NBA, the other two Wang Zhizhi and Barter just seating there [she explains]; I must say I was very anxious and angry about Yao Ming when he playing, but he's already made a big progress, this is very difficult.

[M5 smiles add] she was eager to be his coach or him in the basketball court. [the other boys smile and one of them responds] I did too sometimes [This comment implies that they are not satisfied with Yao Ming's performance in the court or that they hope Yao Ming perform better in the court.]

[F3 continues] he is pretty cool, the hairdo and face shape, a real man! [the other boys smile and look at the boy besides her, he says nothing] He wins honor of Chinese and he signs China, a big country [she emphasizes]. His personalities are

very good too. I'd like to watch his commercials, and for the sports products I may think to use, but others I won't think, he is too big, I am small [she smiles]. On the other hand, I still like pop and movie stars more than athletes. For example Xie Tingfeng, Lu Yi, Wang Fei... [she lists many names of celebrity actors or singers] I must say that I pay more attention to their commercials than athletes' I enjoy watching Yao Ming in the basketball court...he is pretty cool...

[In Group5, F8 did not talk much during the discussion but she states when the session finishes] Yao Ming is a celebrity athlete, I sometimes had to watch sport programs when I shared an apartment with a boy, but very few now. Today, when I was watching these commercials, I was surprised that Yao Ming has such a lot of partners. One day I watched him in Apple, and I'd like to see it, because very few opportunities to see a Chinese in western ads here, he symbolizes our country and our people, I am proud of him. He is very successful and I think he won honors for Chinese, but I won't buy those products, only because of him, because I am a fan of movie stars or famous singers such as Zhou Jielun in Pepsi-Cola, I will think of Pepsi-Cola, because of him.

#### 5. "He's Very Famous, All The Media Have His News, You Can See His News

#### Everywhere": Perceptions of Yao Ming's Media Exposure

Even though the focus group discussions were oriented around Yao Ming's depiction in commercials, a lot of the conversation was about his media exposure. Participants often commented that Yao Ming was a celebrity and was everywhere in the media including television, magazines, newspapers, the Internet and so forth. The high frequency and extensive reach of his exposure would help build brand awareness for the products he endorsed.

[Group5, F8 responds] He is too famous and you can't avoid seeing the news about him, everywhere on Chinese websites.

[M15 responds] Yao Ming is the hottest person in China, and he must be very hot in North America, the media all report his news frequently, he has personal

website, and there are also a lot of his fans who build the fans' websites, so you can get a variety of the information about him from different angles.

[M16 responds] absolutely right. Actually, I am not a basketball fan and my favorite is soccer, I often go to websites to check the information of soccer, but every time I go to the sports area of sohu, sina (one of the three largest Chinese website), or other Chinese website, there's always the latest news about Yao Ming pump out

[Group4, F7 responds] no one doesn't know Yao Ming, he is too famous to be ignored, and his news is everywhere, he is everywhere, today is about his performance in the court, tomorrow is about his girlfriend, and next day is about his family and his life in America, everywhere. [the others nod and smile]

[M11 responds] it's heard he'll get his biography

[M12 responds] I read the book that Yang Yi (a journalist who is one of the best friends of Yao Ming, according to his book) writes through the Internet, it's very interesting, the book talks about his childhood, how did he become successful, his friends and family, he lives as a common person, and some story of him.

[F7 and M11 are surprised and ask him] really, where did you see it, which website [M12 writes down for them]

[Group1, M4 responds] I here can't watch every game of Yao Ming, so most of time I go to the web, it's easy to get timely report. You can also read the remark from the reporters, sometimes it's funnier and more interesting than watching the TV, because of the remark.

[F1 responds] I am not interested in sport very much, but when I check the Xing Wen (the news about celebrities), actually about the movie stars or pop singers [she explains], there are always something about Yao Ming, at least, I read the title and know part of what happens about him, I sometimes read the content and get the details

[F2 nods and responds] he's so famous that the media all pay attention to him, I don't watch basketball games, but I know him a lot, because there are so many news talking about his personal life, and I'd like to know his personal life more than know his performance in the basketball court.



[F1 girl smiles and responds] yes, we'd like to get to know something about celebrities' life, not only their performance, the media know and provide a lot of these, I bookmark some favorite web of star news and check every week, there are always something interesting about Yao Ming's individual life, his girlfriend is also playing basketball.

[when asking to use some words describes the meanings Yao Ming reflects, M17 in Group5 responds] he is very famous, so that he can bring the "celebrity effect" to the product

[then, the facilitator asks what "celebrity effect" is, M17 continues] Yao Ming is very popular, because his name can be seen everywhere in the media, in the sports news, celebrity news, and even the news about some big events such as "Chinese struggling with 'SARS'" and "Chinese distinguish young people". He is everywhere, so when a product has relation with him, more people will know the product, this is a kind of "celebrity effect"

The discussions demonstrated that the respondents noticed the high media exposure of Yao Ming. Yao Ming was "everywhere" in the media and this exposure increased awareness of his name. As a result, when the participants interpreted the message from the commercials, they often brought in the ideas gained from the media rather than merely explaining what they saw in the commercials.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses some of the implications of the study for related theories, marketing practice and research methodology. The theoretical implication of the findings are mainly based on the celebrity endorsement and audience research literatures, as foreseen in the literature reviews. The implications for marketing practice specifically concern Yao Ming's present popularity in sports marketing and concern that he could be better used in product endorsements. The implications for research methodology concern the advantages and difficulties of conducting this kind research and some recommendations for similar research.

It is important to note at the outset that the discussion that follows is based on my best "interpretations" of the study results, and relies heavily on my reading of the "connections between attitudes and perceptions" (Jhally and Lewis, 1992: 9) in the participants' testimony. I discuss the contributions of these findings with the reservation that I cannot "know" what ideas and understandings the participants derive from television content – or as Jhally and Lewis put it, "we cannot perch inside people's brains" (1992: 9). By providing a corpus of relevant data to support my interpretations, I have allowed for alternate explanations.

#### Theoretical Implications of Study Results for Celebrity Endorsement Literature

Celebrity endorsement research that addresses how celebrities influence the meaning and consumption of endorsed products generally supports the thesis that celebrities symbolize certain meanings and these meanings have either positive or negative effects on consumers' attitudes towards the endorsed products. When sponsors

seek a spokesperson, they consider whether the cultural meanings that the celebrity possesses match the identity of their brands. Successful sponsors endeavor to appeal to consumers' interests and hire celebrity athletes who have personality traits that match the cultural meanings of the products. For example, Susman (1984) and Brooks and Harris (1998) have examined how the meanings of the baseball player Babe Ruth matched those of Ford in the 1940's. According to them, Ruth was not only a baseball player, but also a "cultural icon" through which "a mechanized society reflected a rebellion against efforts to rationalize all aspects of man's (sic) activities" (Brooks & Harris, 1988. p 34). Henry Ford mass-produced cheap, mechanically efficient automobiles for the targets that Ford called "the common man". Ruth was regarded as the "national exaggeration" (Brooks and Harris, 1998; c.f. Susman, p. 146) and his image and character reflected the "style" of what Henry Ford called "the common man (sic)" just as described by Brooks and Harris (1998).

Stern (1995) provides a contemporary example of research on the impact of cultural meanings associated with athletes, in his case, Dennis Rodman, the NBA basketball player. While to many older and traditional consumers, Rodman had the image of a "bad boy" on the basketball court, he was an endorser for Converse whose target audience was 12- to 18-year-olds. His image of ever-changing hair colour and his on and off-court antics continued to draw this target's attention. According to Stern (1995), the meanings reflected by Rodman fit into the cultural value of Converse's consumers:

Dennis does what kids admire: he speaks his mind, stays true to himself, doesn't care what others think, isn't artificial, and doesn't suck up. We adults may

classify him as a rebel, but I don't think out of 1,000 kids, you'd ever hear one of them call him that (p. 47)

These studies show that celebrity endorsers represent one way meanings can be transferred to brands (McCracken, 1986; 1989) and that celebrity endorsement can help manage brand identity and influence consumption (Till, 1998). For instance, Babe Ruth delivered the meaning of "a common man" to the Ford vehicles and Dennis Rodman transferred the meanings of "rebelliousness and being true to yourself" to Converse. Also, these studies indicate that celebrities' distinctions are useful meanings for those consumers who have positive attitudes towards these personality traits (McCracken, 1989) and these consumers will have more positive attitudes toward the endorsed products (Boyd and Shank, 2004). For example, while Dennis Rodman's image is very controversial, it has useful meanings for those products that kids consume, and kids are positive toward Converse. In other words, the distinctions of a celebrity may not be useful to certain products or consumer segments. For instance, while Dennis Rodman is an effective endorser of kids' products, he may not be effective in speaking for the products of those consumers who are older or have traditional cultural conceptions. Moreover, these researches indicate that the distinctions of the celebrity consist in a combination of a celebrity's cultural world including, age, social status, personality, gender, physical appearance and so forth (McCracken, 1989). For example, the combination of the hairdo, rebellion, antics, and speaking style of Dennis Rodman and the behavior, and interests of Babe Ruth construct social distinctions that when allied with particular products affected consumption among diverse segments in different eras.

The results of this thesis research have implications for McCracken's (1989) work as well as the literature cited above. This study found that the interpretations of Chinese young adults of the depicted images of a Chinese celebrity involved various cultural categories including age, physical appearance, personality traits, gender, lifestyle, professional performance and so on. Respondents described Yao Ming as "a big young man" who was a "famous and powerful" basketball player but "humble" "kind", "humorous", and "living simply". This finding helps to illustrate the first step of McCracken's "meaning transfer" model that an "interconnected set of meanings" (p. 313) from the culturally constituted world constructs a celebrity's cultural identity. Also, the meanings interpreted by the respondents can be categorized into three levels (Appendix B) based on their varied experiences of and feelings toward a Chinese celebrity. This finding expands McCracken's (1989) "meaning transfer" model to show that the public persona of a celebrity is the combination of all the cultural categories manifested in how people encounter, make sense of and subsequently communicate the celebrity's meanings to others.

As Appendix B showed, the cultural meanings on the first level are generic meanings most celebrities possess that encompass fame, career success, and achievement or performance. Meanings on the second level are the major portion of the cultural persona of a celebrity that makes him/her distinct from most of the other celebrities. For example, Yao Ming is "big" and unique with characteristics such as "healthy spirit, humorous, and humble". Meanings on the third level are special feelings of Chinese young adults towards a Chinese celebrity athlete with regard to "nationalism and patriotism". This finding may contribute to improving our understanding of the cultural

meanings about a celebrity. For example, Babe Ruth and Dennis Rodman are both celebrity athletes with similar meanings on the first level such as being famous, succeeding in their career, and performing well, but with distinctions related to the second level such as lifestyle and personalities, and special meanings for diverse segments related to the third level such as “a common man” or “a rebel.”

This study also found that the meanings interpreted by the interviewed Chinese young adults toward a Chinese celebrity were delivered to the products endorsed by the celebrity. The participants suggested that Yao Ming’s “age” reflected the “youthful image” of Pepsi, his “wisdom and big size” signified the “intelligence and needs of different segments” for the Apple notebook, his “healthy image” counteracted the need for McDonalds to improve the quality of its products and his “pure smile” showed that McDonalds is “kind” to kids, his “power” was linked to the “effectiveness” of Gatorade and his “expertise as an athlete” reflected the “professionalism in sport” of Reebok. These findings are consistent with the second stage of McCracken’s (1989) “meaning transfer” model, that meanings are transferred to the endorsed products via commercials or advertisements. Therefore, this finding suggests that the situation of a Chinese celebrity athlete endorsing a product is very similar to that of western celebrities. This also suggests that a positive Chinese celebrity athlete can have positive impacts on endorsed products (Boyd & Shank, 2004). While respondents displayed positive and improved brand attitudes for most products Yao Ming endorsed, this study also found that the respondents did not change their attitudes toward a couple of products he spoke for such as Sohu.com and China Unicom. This finding is also consistent with McCracken’s (1989) theory that an attractive celebrity is not effective for all product

categories, and it indicates that a Chinese celebrity may also be ineffective at endorsing certain products while he or she can be influential for many products. This finding also demonstrates the efficacy of match-up theory. As Jones and Schumann (2000) have shown, “congruency” (i.e., “matching up” a product and an endorser) is critical for establishing consistency among messages. Martin (1996) also suggested that if information about an athlete and his/her sport fits with consumers’ perceptions of the endorsed products, the salience of the matched image would enhance the value of the endorsement. Match-up theory demonstrates the importance of evaluating the endorsement process by comparing attributes of the celebrity and the product.

Furthermore, this study found that the interviewed Chinese young adults purchased or showed their potential preference in consuming the products endorsed by Yao Ming. This finding is consistent with the third step of McCracken’s “meaning transfer” model that the consumer will acquire the meanings that the celebrity endowed to the products by purchasing the goods. Some respondents expressed their preference for an Apple notebook, because Yao Ming delivered the meaning of quality, attractiveness, and intelligence to Apple. Some respondents showed their pleasure and passion in drinking Gatorade, because Yao Ming delivered the meanings of “power” and “recovering energy”. However, Yao Ming’s influence on the cultural meanings the participants could achieve through consuming his endorsed products was modest in some cases. For example, some respondents explained that the price of an Apple Notebook was too high for them and hence they would purchase one when they could afford to do so in the future, and in the mean time they were not embarrassed to possess the brand. Also, some respondents indicated that not all the people in their small communities (e.g. a

group with several basketball fans) drank Gatorade and they did not “lose face” because of it. This finding provides a different perspective of Chinese consumers to Wilson and Sparks’ findings that “symbolic power” and “style-copying among peers” was widespread among the Black youth with respect to purchasing products endorsed by their favourite athletes.

#### Theoretical Implications of Study Results for Audience Research Literature

Diverse theories that address audience reactions to the media suggest that audiences are not passive recipients (Hall, 1973; Morley’s, 1980; Moores, 1993). Morley (1980) suggested that media research should consider diverse genres for different communities. Research done by Wilson and Sparks (1996) indicated that the Black and non-Black youth they interviewed actively interpreted commercials in different ways. They also pointed out that similar “interpretive strategies” existed in the same “interpretive communities.” This thesis research found that the participants comprised a kind of interpretive community. The respondents stated that they lived and studied abroad as overseas Chinese students and that this situation may have caused them to have stronger feelings for a Chinese celebrity. They stated that their preference and willingness to see a Chinese symbol, acquire news about China, or watch a Chinese celebrity in commercials on western television would likely decrease if they were in China. This finding is compatible with Wilson and Sparks’ (1996) conception that members of an interpretive community share similar “interpretive strategies”. Also, the special nature of the interpretive community in this study suggests that the study might have reached a different conclusion if it researched Chinese university students in mainland China. This possibility provides an opportunity for future study, perhaps



exploring how Chinese who live in China interpret Yao Ming's depiction in commercials. Meanwhile, keeping this factor of social location in mind, it helps us to better understand the importance for audience research to clarify the nature of the study populations when using interpretive communities.

This study found that the participants' discussions of the celebrity's image included more information than the commercials themselves provided. The participants brought in a lot of extra meanings they acquired from other media such as the Internet, newspapers, magazines and television. These meanings, including "humble," "simple lifestyle," and "humorous", described by some respondents cannot be obtained from the descriptive analysis of the content of the commercials themselves. Some respondents explained that they had read Yao Ming's biography or news or journal articles about his performance and life and that they brought their knowledge to the discussion. This finding is symmetrical with Ang's (1996) theory that the media is powerful in influencing readers while they are "active audiences". It is also consistent with Dong Jinxia's (2003) theory about the Chinese media and the celebrity athletes. According to Dong (2003),

"Celebrity athletes have in recent decades received positive profiles in the Chinese media, and have been frequently and uncritically applauded by the media as national heroes and heroines...however, in the last decade there have appeared negative profiles of sportsmen and women..." (p. 159)

For example, when comparing Yao Ming and Wang Zhizhi, some respondents suggested that the former was patriotic, considering his motherland and the public, while the latter was selfish and less caring about the community. These meanings were all derived from

media reports. Moreover, this finding may help supplement genre theory with the insight that substantially different meanings can result even within a specific genre that has been deliberately selected for a particular audience.

### Implications for Marketing Practice

This study contributes to our understanding of why Yao Ming is so popular in sports marketing. In addition to the common meanings of celebrities as famous and successful people, five focus groups interpreted Yao Ming as distinctive and expressed that he signifies China and Chinese nationalism. This finding attributes Yao Ming's marketing popularity to two major features. First, Yao Ming's personal appeal, which is distinct from most other celebrities, brings a "breath of fresh air" to the sport celebrity world, and draws significant media attention and audience interest. Second, the fact that Yao Ming symbolizes China gives sponsors the confidence to hire him to export the Chinese market which is the biggest in the world. This suggests that the interpretations of the focus group participants are consistent with what the marketers anticipated. Yao Ming's influence would be in China and for Chinese people in North America. It also indicates that most of Yao Ming's endorsements are probably effective.

This study found that the participants had the intention to learn more about and potentially consume products endorsed by Yao Ming. Some respondents pointed out that Yao Ming could successfully endorse male products that were commensurate with "powerful slam-dunking," and automobiles and airlines where "more space, flexibility, and comfort" could be reflected by his "super big and intelligent choice." This finding suggests that marketers should consider these product categories as part of Yao Ming's

endorsing profile. This finding also suggests that Redenbach's (1999) theory that a celebrity can endorse an array of products can be applied to Chinese celebrity athletes.

This study found that the female participants tended to have different feelings towards Chinese celebrity athletes than the male participants, even while both groups were generally supportive. Female respondents explained that they would only purchase sports products that an athlete endorsed and that for other products they were more influenced by popular celebrities such as musicians, singers, actors or actresses. For example, some female respondents suggested that they would use Reebok rather than other products Yao Ming endorsed. This finding is consistent with Boyd and Shank's (2004) research that male and female attitudes toward the expertise of celebrity athletes are similar. Also, some female respondents suggested that Yao Ming brought a positive message to Pepsi-Cola but they would buy the products because of another endorser - Zhou Jielun, a famous musician. This finding brings a new perspective to understanding the attitudes of young Chinese women towards Chinese celebrities. Keeping this in mind, therefore, it is important for marketing practitioners to be careful about using Yao Ming for non-sports products when a majority of consumers are women. In another words, marketers must select the right kind of celebrity in promoting in China.

Moreover, this study found that there was no significant difference in the participants' interpretations of Yao Ming's depiction based on whether they were watching western or Chinese commercials. Respondents were consistent that both Chinese and western commercials portrayed Yao Ming as having an oriental image with apparent oriental characteristics such as "soft," "gentle," and "Chinese man." This finding suggests that the reflection of the orient and China via Yao Ming is safe and

unproblematic, because this meaning is supported by Chinese consumers. Because the respondents were Chinese and the commercials for Apple, Visa, and Gatorade were only televised in North America where the majority of audiences are western people, it is possible that westerners might obtain different cultural meanings from those experienced by the study participants. This possibility provides an opportunity for future study, perhaps exploring how different interpretive communities interpret the same celebrity athlete. Most importantly, however, for the present study is the fact that because these three commercials were made for western audiences, it was possible that Chinese viewers might be offended by the racial depiction (stereotypes) of Yao as Chinese, yet clearly this was not the case.

#### Implications of Study Results for Research Methodology

Very few previous studies focused on the cultural interpretation of Chinese celebrity athletes. Both Liu (2000) and Zhang (2003) used content analysis to analyze the cultural meanings exhibited in Chinese advertisements. The research of the former summarized the common cultural meanings of Chinese celebrity and the research of the latter generalized the cultural values that Chinese advertisements promoted to young adults. The content analyses used in these two studies provide a general understanding of cultural meanings about Chinese celebrity and endorsement.

By comparison, this study combined interpretive analysis with focus groups. The interpretive analysis provided a basic understanding of the narratives of the commercials and the meanings they plausibly would express. The focus groups provided insights into the actual meanings of the commercials for the groups who viewed them. The combination of these two methods provided a means for identifying whether the

meanings were directly acquired from the commercial messages or indirectly brought in by the audience, for example, from prior exposure to other media. This also provides a means for comparing those meanings. For example, respondents' interpretations of Yao Ming's simple lifestyle could not be directly obtained from the descriptions of any of the commercials but this meaning helped to build up his healthy image and enable him to be distinct from most other celebrities. Therefore, the combination of these methods helps to understand that the meanings brought in from outside the commercials were at least as important as those inside them.

The proposed recruiting methods of this study involved using an Internet poster and a snow-ball method. Initially, the researcher thought that prospective participants would actively respond if they read an advertisement posted on the Internet of the graduate student association, however, no one responded to the ad. There may have been three reasons for the failure of the web-based recruiting method, as the president of the association suggested. First, the hit rate of their website may be very low. Second, association members may have had only a passive interest in participating in focus groups for research, even though they were interested in the topic of the research. Third, there might not have been any readers who were interested in the topic. While the Internet ad was ineffective, the snow-ball method was very effective. This was demonstrated when the president phoned an individual (only his third call) and this person quickly collected sufficient participants who fit the sampling criteria for the focus groups. This confirmed the effectiveness of the snow-ball method and showed that similar research could successfully use this method to recruit participants.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

This thesis addressed the attitudes of Chinese young adults toward Yao Ming's portrayal in commercials and towards his personal influence on the products he endorses. The participants' attitudes toward Yao Ming were supportive and the meanings they obtained were all positive on three levels: 1. common meanings as a celebrity, 2. Yao's distinctiveness from most other celebrity athletes, and 3. his symbolism of Chinese and China. The last two levels of cultural meanings contribute most to his marketing popularity. The study found that there is no meaning difference when the viewers interpreted Yao Ming's depiction in western and Chinese commercials and that in both cases the meanings were all about oriental and Chinese values.

The study results informed work on celebrity endorsements and indicated that a Chinese celebrity athlete, like Yao Ming, was indeed able to deliver meaning to the products he endorses and hence improve the brand name. The focus group results showed that the effect on consumption of Chinese viewers was fairly moderate, even though all viewers were consistent in attributing value to Yao Ming as an endorser. The results also showed that the degree of influence of celebrity athletes varies between male and female viewers. Moreover, a special condition - living abroad was discovered and this may have caused the participants' feelings towards a Chinese celebrity to be stronger than those when living in mainland China.

#### Limitations

This project had several limitations. First, the study was about Chinese young adults and conducted in Vancouver, and therefore, participant selection was limited to

Chinese young adults living in Vancouver. In addition, the Chinese population is the largest in the world and therefore, culturally diverse even in Mainland China. For example, people live in different areas, each with different economic, cultural, and living conditions. Because of this diversification, participants' attitudes towards a celebrity athlete may differ, according to their region of origin. It is also possible that living out of China may cause them to have different attitudes toward a Chinese celebrity than they would have if they remained in China. Finally, the study only applies to a certain period of Yao Ming's career. Since the situation of an athlete changes from time to time, some factors such as Yao Ming's performance, his behavior, and the media representation of Yao Ming may change in the future. Because such change may influence an audience's attitude towards him, it should be made clear that these results are specific to the time period in which the research was conducted.

#### Recommendations for Future Study

Over the course of this thesis project, potential improvements for this study were identified and other areas of relevant research that could extend this work were noted. Based on these, I have outlined briefly six questions for future study.

1. Has Yao Ming brought anything new to sport marketing in China? For example, are there any changes in how Chinese professional athletes are being treated because of Yao Ming? Sports marketing in China is developing from an "Olympic-driven model" to a "marketing-driven model" (Geng, Burton, & Blakemore 2002; Dong, 2003), and traditionally, Chinese sponsors have favored using gold medalists to be product endorsers (Schelvogt, 2002). Within this "transition period," increasingly more celebrity athletes have become product endorsers, especially those who are not gold medalists, because

gold medalists are the minority after all. To examine whether Yao Ming is contributing to a change in using athletes as endorsers, some factors would need to be evaluated such as changes in salaries of professional athletes and numbers of endorsements before and after Yao Ming's joining the NBA, the relationships between these changes and Yao Ming, and the attitudes of consumers towards the Olympics and other sports. Have there been changes in the sports mechanism in China that might be attributed to Yao? In China, in the mid 1980s, Olympic victory occupied Chinese attention. From the beginning of the 1990s, change was undertaken to reform Olympic sports, and after 1995 the reform deepened, as Dong (2003) has described, "Men's basketball, tennis and volleyball adopted the club system and professional league competitions. They were allowed to employ foreign players, to sell broadcasting rights and to sign lucrative sponsorship contracts" (p.125). Not only is Yao Ming's joining the NBA one of the successful results of sports reform in China, but also the Yao Ming phenomenon brings some new challenges to China Sports. For example, how does China Sports balance the reality that Chinese athletes are employed by other countries and serve for China? Will there be any changes in the sports system in the face of athlete such as Yao Ming who has tremendous income? Will China Sports change some of the regulations because of Yao Ming (e.g. the issue of Yao's protest to Coca-Cola, details in the following section)?

2. Has Yao Ming made or could he make an impact on the economy in China? As a multi-product endorser, Yao Ming may benefit some brands but against the competitors of these brands. For example, Yao Ming sued Coca-Cola for image right infringement in May, 2003, because he and two other members of the Chinese national team appeared on Coke bottles. He is a spokesman for Pepsi that is a well-known competitor of Coca-Cola.



He demanded immediate withdrawal of the promotional materials and the products with his name and image as well as a public apology and 1 Yuan Renminbi (Chinese currency) symbolic compensation. According to the Chinese Sports Management Company, Coca-Cola had the right to use the "group image" of the Chinese team. Finally, Coca-Cola apologized to him in October. Apparently, this was an economic battle between two soft drink giants. More importantly, this issue exposed the leak in the law of Chinese sports.

3. How are Chinese teenagers socially influenced by Yao Ming? A student from a secondary school in Shanghai stated "Someday, there'll be no American left in the NBA" when he was practicing basketball on a court (Fackler, 2002). Yao Ming's fame, success, and wealth would have a very big impact on Chinese youth who are in a formative period during which the concepts of their value and beliefs are forming. For example, would some students abandon studying in order to pursue sports careers, because Yao Ming provides a very good example of an athlete with the best prestige and the highest income in China.

4. What is Yao Ming's impact on western people? This research was conducted among Chinese young adults, but there are a lot of westerners who like to watch Yao Ming play. What meanings can this group gain? How are they influenced by the commercials that portray Yao Ming? In the meantime, some of the commercials used in the research have only been broadcasted in North America and thus are aimed at this market; therefore, to better understand whether these endorsements are effective, research must be done on Yao Ming's impact on local people.

5. How are Chinese young adults living in China influenced by Yao Ming? The initial purpose of this research was to examine the reactions of Chinese people to Yao

Ming, but the special character of the focus groups were found to distinguish them from residents in China. Given that the participants were all overseas students, their feelings of national identity were stronger. As they discussed in the sessions, when the news, affairs, images, persons, or even the languages pertained to China, they appeared to be more interested if they were living in Canada than in China. A future study conducted in China would be very useful for understanding Yao Ming's influence on and interpretation by indigenous Chinese people. Moreover, the comparison between these two groups and the research on other age-range groups will contribute to improving our understandings of Chinese celebrity and Chinese community.

6. Several other potential perspectives on Yao are worth studying in the future. While Yao Ming has achieved worldwide fame, he is a relative novice in the NBA with only two seasons experience, and he is also new to the media, hence his phenomenon is a timely issue and his situation will continue changing. Athletic cases are sometimes unpredictable. Kobe Bryant provides a good lesson for all the celebrity athletes. Kobe was also very new, young, and called "tomorrow's star" when getting media fan and sponsor attention. However, a scandal resulting from an illegal sexual assault almost destroyed his career and qualification as an endorser. With companies' wonder whether the endorsement is still effective or not, it was reported that several endorsement was delayed or canceled and total amount of such fees was account for tens of millions (Sohu, 2003). Similarly, Yao Ming's future is filled with uncertainty and the public and the media are regularly tracking him; therefore, it is worth doing research on his reputation. For example, what and how will his reputation have impacts on his image and endorsements? In the meantime, his performance in the NBA is another topic. On the one

hand, the statistics indicate that he has made progress and there is a possibility that he will become one of the best NBA basketball players. On the other hand, while the statistics are improved, he is new with a lot of instability and his performance is likely to be up and down. How will his performance or expertise as a basketball player influence his endorsements? And what are these influences? These six topics are all potentially fruitful avenues of research.

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Appendix A:  
Focus Groups Participants

	Male	Age	In Vancouver (mo.)	Female	Age	In Vancouver (mo.)
<b>Group1</b>	M1	19	14	F1	20	24
	M2	20	24	F2	20	15
	M3	20	33			
	M4	21	30			
<b>Group2</b>	M5	20	24	F3	19	17
	M6	22	28	F4	20	28
<b>Group3</b>	M7	24	36	F5	21	30
	M8	24	20	F6	22	24
	M9	22	18			
	M10	23	20			
<b>Group4</b>	M11	19	23	F7	21	26
	M12	22	18			
	M13	21	20			
<b>Group5</b>	M14	22	24	F8	22	24
	M15	21	15			
	M16	21	14			
	M17	20	26			
	M18	23	28			
<b>Total No.</b>	18			8		

Appendix B:

Three Levels Of Meanings Obtained By Chinese Young Adults From Yao Ming's Image

	Depth of the Feelings	Descriptions	Correlations
First Level	General features of a celebrity athlete	Cool, Powerful, Successful, Famous, Self-confident	Physical appearance, Expertise, Achievement, The media exposure
Second Level	Yao Ming's distinctions from others	Modest, Healthy, Kind, Genial, Enthusiastic, Honest and Simple, Simple Lifestyle, Humorous	Physical appearance, Unique Characteristics and Lifestyle
Third Level	Special feelings to special interpretive communities	The Sign of China, Chinese, Asia, all about oriental	Nationalism, Patriotism

Appendix C:  
Focus Group Guide

1. Introducing

- 1) Purpose of the session: Welcome everybody to join our discussion about advertising portrayed with Yao Ming's image. The purpose of this study is to examine what cultural meanings Chinese young adults gain from Yao's image in the ads. Please feel free to talk about your own opinions.
- 2) Structure of the session: This session includes five steps: introduction, small survey, watching advertisements and filling out the questionnaire, discussion, and conclusion.
- 3) Privacy declaration: As this session is for research purposes, please give me permission to use your ideas and opinions in my research. However, for your privacy, your real name will not be used in the thesis. I am recording this session and I will transcribe the audio-recording using pseudonyms for your names. No one's real name will appear in the transcripts or the thesis, or any publication from the project. The tape and computer text files will be kept on disk and in a locked cabinet at UBC or at my home. While in transit the disk will be in only the principal investigator's (my professor) or my possession. Everyone participant the discussion will get two long-distance phone cards as a gift. Meanwhile, there is no obligation to answer, participate, or continue participating.

2. Filling out the "Biographical Information" (Appendix 2): the purpose for this small survey is to collect information about your interests in Yao Ming.

3. Viewing Advertisements and filling out the "Commercial Viewing Questionnaire" (Appendix 3).

- 1) Apple computer (Big and Small)
- 2) Visa (Super Bowl Ad)
- 3) Gatorade
- 4) Pepsi-Cola China (Inspiration)
- 5) NBA (I love this game)

4. Discussing:

- 1) Which was your favourite commercial? Why? Tell the story of the commercials.

- 2) What meanings does Yao Ming symbolize? Please use some specific words to describe these meanings.
  - 3) Does the use of Yao Ming affect your opinion of the advertisement? Y/N How?
  - 4) Would it make a difference if the advertisements substituted Wang Zhizhi or Batere for Yao Ming? If yes, how would it change it? (intend to compare the distinctions of Yao Ming from other two NBA Chinese players)
  - 5) Would it make a difference if the advertisements substituted another white or black NBA player for Yao Ming? (intend to compare the distinctions of Yao Ming from other NBA players)
  - 6) Would it make a difference if the advertisements substituted another Chinese movie stars such as Jacky Chan, Jack Li, or Chow for Yao Ming? (intend to compare the distinctions of Yao Ming from other Chinese celebrities)
  - 7) How would you change the advertisements to make it more appealing to you?
  - 8) Do you think that his image fits fast-food products? (to learn what they think of his endorsement with McDonalds)
  - 9) Do you think that his image fits Internet brands? (to learn what they think of his endorsement with Sohu)
  - 10) What products categories does Yao Ming fit to speak for? (to learn whether they think him as a multiple products endorser)
  - 11) Being a Chinese living in Vancouver, would it be difference you think of Yao Ming if you live in mainland China?
5. Conclusion and appreciation:

Thank you very much for your participation and discussion. These two long-distance cards are small gifts of my appreciation. If anyone of you wants to know the result of this research, please let me know and I will give you a summary of my thesis.

Appendix D:  
Biographical Information

Instructions: The following questions are intended to provide some background information about you. Answer all the questions as accurately as you can. If it is unclear what is being asked, please ask for help from the group leader.

1. Age: \_\_\_\_ (years)
2. Sex: Male/Female (circle)
3. Your interest \_\_\_\_\_
4. How long have been studying abroad \_\_\_\_\_ (months)
5. How many NBA games did you watch last year, because Yao was playing?  
    ☐ 0            ☐ around 1-2 games            ☐ 3+games
6. How many times did you go to the website to read news about Yao Ming?  
    ☐ 0            ☐ around 1-2 time            ☐ 3+times

### Appendix E:

Theatre Viewing Questionnaire for study (based on similar version used in work on audience interpretations of soft drink, beer commercials as well as athletic apparel). This questionnaire accompanies the biographical information form that is completed after the focus group session.

#### **Commercial Viewing Questionnaire (one to be filled out for each commercial)**

Please respond to the following questions after viewing the television commercial.

1. Have you seen this commercial before? Yes/No (circle one)

If yes, approximately how long ago? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you buy this brand? Yes/No (circle one)

3. What did you like most about this commercial?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. What did you like least? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_