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Media Representation of Conflict on Consumer Rights and Consumer Nationalism in Transitional China
變革中國背景下的消費者權益衝突和消費者民族主義的媒體再現

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Abstract

This study focused on media representation of conflict on consumer rights and conflict driven by consumer nationalism in the context of China’s consumer revolution in which this socialist country has gradually transformed into a consumer society. From the theoretical perspective that perceived consumption as an “institutional field,” the structural changes in China’s radical social transition at the macro level can be linked to the formation of consumer culture that nurtures both individual and collective identities of Chinese consumers. The rising consciousness of the hybrid consumer identity has resulted in consumers’ pursuit of individual rights and expression of collective and national identity. Although the state sees its interests coinciding with the individuals in certain political, economic and legal aspects, assertion of consumer rights still conflicted with the short-term economic interests of enterprises, interests of sustaining reputation of domestic industry and interests of the government itself at some extent. In addition to the conflict on consumer’s individual rights, there also emerges a type of conflict in which consumers boycott the foreign products to express the shared nationalistic sentiment. The consumer-related conflicts offer a good scenario for exploring the interplay between different main actors such as the state, market and consumer.

Guided by the hierarchical model of influential factors on media content and media framing theory, this study explored how media represent conflict on consumer rights and conflict driven by consumer nationalism with the considerations of complex media roles and new emerging journalistic practice as media reform deepens. A longitudinal content analysis of news coverage in media with different party affiliation: People’s Daily, Southern Daily and Southern Metropolis Daily during 2000 to 2016 was conducted. It demonstrated, first, there is significant difference in
use of angular news frame among three newspapers. People’s Daily with highest
degree of party affiliation concerns more about the legal aspects of conflicts on
consumer rights, while Southern Daily and Southern Metropolis Daily with lower
degree of party affiliation focus more on responsibility issue in the conflicts.
Comparing the use of other angular frames between three different media outlets,
People’s Daily is more likely to adopt leadership frame and consequence frame than
other two media outlets. Second, the result shows the significant difference among
three newspapers in use of dyadic news frames. People’s Daily with the highest
degree of party affiliation is more likely to use thematic frame, and accordingly, it is
less likely to use episodic frame than other two papers. Third, there is no significant
difference between media supervised by local party committee and the local-level
more marketized media in the way they frame social issues. Fourth, the result
demonstrates there is significant difference in attribution of responsibility among
three newspapers with different degrees of party affiliation. Compared to Southern
Daily and Southern Metropolis Daily, People’s Daily with the highest degree of party
affiliation is more likely to attribute responsibility to society-level causes. Fifth,
dyadic news frame and sources adopted in consumer rights-oriented conflicts is
associated with news sources. Compared to episodic frame, thematic frame is
associated more with expert source and government official source. While compared
to thematic frame, episodic frame is associated more with consumer source and
enterprise source.

The results of content analysis reflect discursive convergence between local-
level party media and commercial media because of their common way to frame
social issues and the common direction of attribution in reporting consumer rights
issues. It indicates the political control of media at the local level has been loosened
on the issues that are less politically sensitive. The boundary of media roles between local party media and market media became blurred. Local-level party media facing the market forces started to adopt the way appealing to the audiences.

Through the textual analysis of media representation of conflicts driven by consumer nationalism in different social context, this study found although media presented completely different tone and attitude toward the consumer boycott in two similar incidents, “boycott Carrefour” in 2008 and “boycott Lotte” in 2017, actually the central official media and commercial media both performed consistently with the state’s ideologies, in order to achieve the political purpose in specific social circumstances. The more privately-oriented consumer identity was re-aligned with the more publicly-oriented national identity by confluence of both state and media forces. The state and media appropriated patriotic and nationalism ideology to purposively manipulate public opinions and provoke nationalistic campaigns for its political goals. It can be seen that on one hand, nationalism provides space for consumers to express their emotions and opinions with a rising consciousness of individual identity. But on the other hand, this kind of individual expression is largely influenced by the attitude of government. The government also exploits nationalism to mobilize the public to achieve its political goals.