

Head & Shoulders' Commercials in China and in Italy: Understanding Cultural Differences To Develop Effective Communication

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Introduction¹

Marco is the H&S global brand manager. In his office in Milan, he is reviewing annual figures, and looking at communication costs, he starts wondering about a worldwide cost-cutting strategy. In his mind, the option of developing a global one-fit-all campaign instead of several local ads seems the best solution. He decides to share his thoughts with his colleagues before making the final decision.

Chiara, the Italian-Chinese newly employed H&S marketing analyst, who has a background of sinological studies and entered H&S after coming back from a work experience in China, participates to the meeting, taking place in the late afternoon.

Marco: *“our brand has a global reach, our brand identity is well defined and customers appreciate our products. We’ve invested a fortune to communicate our uniqueness, but now I have been asked to pay attention to communication costs and I am inclined to opt for a single campaign fitting all the markets we operate in. In my view a single global campaign would be equally effective as compared to different campaigns for local markets and it would save us some costs. Think about what we did last year with the Chinese and Italian markets (see Annex 1 – The Italian and Chinese Advertising campaigns), don’t you think that we could develop a global one-fits-all campaign?”*

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Giovanna Devetag (Luiss University), Giovanni Zazzerini (Luiss Business School), Vincenza Caputo (Value China S.r.l.) prepared this case with the contribution of Xie Yi Wu and based on published sources. Some information and identities in this case have been disguised. The case is developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

Head & Shoulders

Head & Shoulders is an individual brand of P&G, the world's largest maker of household and personal-care products. With the proprietary zinc pyrithione (ZPT) formula, Head & Shoulders effectively targets the source of dandruff, so men and women can feel confident that their hair looks great. H&S target are men and women with dandruff and scalp problems that search for a shampoo able to maintain a healthy scalp and hair, allowing them to gain the right confidence in interacting and socializing with others. The main difference with other brands is that while the latter focus on enhancing or improving hair condition, including unmanageable hair, oily/dry hair, hair fall and including also the dandruff and scalp problems, H&S focuses especially on the dandruff problem, oily hair, and sensitive scalp, with an emphasis on how the product can prevent dandruff from coming back in just one wash. Furthermore, it provides a broad range of products to better suit individual scalp types in order to satisfy specific needs.

With a great coverage in **China**, P&G decided to introduce Head&Shoulders (海飞丝) in the Chinese market. Market researches had shown that a huge part of the Chinese population suffers from oily hair and dandruff. In addition, as dandruff is more evident on Chinese's dark hair, common is the uncomfortable feeling and the insecurity arising from the problem. Therefore, Head & Shoulders could really make a difference in hundreds of thousands of Chinese customers' lives. Thanks to the fact that P&G was already a well-known and trusted brand, H&S had little difficulties in entering the Chinese domestic market; however, H&S still had to take into account the peculiarity of the Chinese culture and the moves of competitors such as Clear and Rejoice in order to create brand awareness and to operate a successful product positioning. H&S uses a variety of communication channels, from advertising, to organization of events and sales promotions to various forms of direct and interactive marketing. In addition, the brand is famous for its wide use of celebrities as testimonials.

The **Italian market** for shampoos is dominated by Pantene, which offers a great variety of products that target customers specific needs. For every problem concerning hair – from curly to straight hair, from oily to dry hair, damaged hair, and dandruff – Pantene has a solution. In addition, besides solving any type of hair problem, Pantene also promises to make the customer hair soft and bright as silk. It was then quite a challenge for Head&Shoulders to compete with Pantene, given that H&S offers much less product variety. Moreover, despite H&S solid reputation as the best shampoo in the world in targeting scalp problems, H&S could not hope to achieve the same success in the Italian market as the one accomplished in the Chinese market due to the different prevailing hair types in the two populations.

Culture Matters

Chiara disagrees with Marco's view, arguing that it is not possible neither convenient to consider the two markets as one; even in a globalized world, cultural differences matter. *"Chinese culture is too complex to be considered together with others ... Chinese customers will always show different decision making and purchasing behaviours because of their peculiar culture and background."*

Marco: *"I know that culture is important, but I don't think our Ads were designed having in mind the different cultural values of the Italian and Chinese markets. Don't you think so?"*

Chiara: *"I disagree. The product is the same, but communication is a cultural issue and according to me the cultural difference of the two countries is that huge that it cannot be ignored."*

Marco: *"For example?"*

Chiara: *"Since we are talking about beauty care, let me start from the concept of beauty itself. In Italy, like in the other Western countries, there is the tendency to see beauty in what is different because it is considered out of the common beauty. So people tend to accentuate their uniqueness creating their own personal style for their outfit, hairstyle, make-up etc. A clear example of this trend is the popularity that some models obtained thanks to their gap-toothed smile or to their freckles. In fact, in individualist cultures, like the Western one, the sense of autonomy and freedom prevail, and priority is given to task; individuals can join willingly and belong to many specific in-groups; consequently, they have less influence on the in-group members and ties are weaker. In collectivist cultures, instead, priority is given to collective interest and to relations between people, since the group is what defines the identity of the member. As relationships are based on mutual obligations and loyalty, violation of the rules from one member will reflect on the whole group, which will feel shame due to the sense of collective obligation. Therefore in China, characterized by collectivist culture, beauty is perceived as an ideal model to emulate. So Chinese people struggle to comply with the beauty standards defined by the society and that usually take shape in the most popular stars of the moment. That's why in China it is very common to see girls with an almost identical look, in the way they dress, the haircut, the make-up etc. Just some years ago, while I was working in China, I noticed that all my Chinese friends dyed their hair the same colour and adopted the same haircut, and when I inquired why, I found out that it was the new style of a famous mainstream TV star at that time. The bigger surprise to me was that they were very proud of it! I can't imagine my Italian friends to do the same thing here back in Italy. They will rather blame each other of "copying" and it can even affect their friendship."*

Marco: *"I think these are just some trends in fashion that change throughout time, and we can already notice a convergence between the Western and Chinese beauty models"*

Chiara: *"I believe that although modern-day beauty standards in China reveal a certain fascination with the West, the concept of beauty still appears strongly attached to the Oriental cultural values. In the Imperial China, beauty was embodied in the image of perfect women, *Si Da Meinü*, the Four Great Beauties. These legendary Chinese women have inspired the formalization of the characteristics that were considered signs of beauty and to which Chinese women needed to conform with, some of which continue to be at the hearth of beauty definition in China until today, like white skin."*

Marco: "Then if it is just about the physical features we can choose a model that is beautiful for both Western and Chinese standards. It shouldn't be a problem!"

Chiara: "Communicating a brand is not just about selecting the aspect of the model. Behind the concepts of beauty that changed and will change throughout the various periods of history, we should take in account the way beauty standards are set, that is deeply rooted in culture. In the same way that in Imperial China, the Four Great Beauties personified the ideal beauty, also nowadays and in the future, beauty in China will be about conformity to a model. In fact, Chinese culture is strongly influenced by Confucianism. This philosophy is based on the idea that individuals should comply to the model of the *junzi*, the Confucian gentleman, respecting *li*, the ritual, that are socially acceptable forms of behaviour. According to Confucianism, the individual is not an isolated entity, but everyone has his own position and role in the society. So his behaviours has to conform to the specific norms, the *li*, and virtues set for his role. Among these, the most important is *xiao*, which is the filial piety that refers to showing proper respect for the parents and the ancestors. It also represents the epitome of the hierarchical organization of social relationships and is traditionally viewed as the absolute bedrock of a good society. The practice of *li* represents the social responsibilities to work for the larger public good and to preserve harmony in the society, even at the cost of individuality. Non-conformity to the *li* will be punished with avoidance and rejection, which also means exclusion from community. In fact, behaviours that are not socially acceptable will bring shame; a concept that in China is known as *diu mianzi*, literally to "lose the face". So Chinese people live respecting the *li* in the attempt of preserving their "face", and cultivate an abundant relationship network, called *guanxi*, inside the community. These socially acceptable behaviours, expanded from the moral sphere to every aspect of social life, also includes physical appearance. So, the society and the group have the priority over the individual in such a way that even in assessing beauty, people with different looks are considered "disrespectful" rather than "unique"."

Marco: "But Confucianism dates back to thousands of years ago. China is not any longer an Empire, but a modern country"

Chiara: "That's the point: some aspects of culture and society remain unaltered, like Confucian values. Confucianism was based on hierarchical structure leading to a large power distance among classes. In the modern Chinese society, that preserves a large power distance culture, people still show great reliance on centralization and formalization of authority and great tolerance for the lack of autonomy. This means that social hierarchy and authority are normally recognized and respected (e.g. parent-child, teacher-student,...), and every individual's social status is accepted as his rightful place in the hierarchy. The outer appearance, which not only includes clothes and shoes, but also posture and manners, is a "code" to show one's own position to others, which are expected to respond with proper behaviour as a sign of respect. Therefore, people still receive a lot of pressure to attain the beauty standards from family, friends and employers. Many working people in China see achieving a certain beauty standard as a necessary step in employment. In fact while in Italy or in Europe it is not requested to add a picture to your CV, in China

this is compulsory and in some Chinese JD, it's not rare to read "pleasant aspect" among the requirements. In Europe however, this is considered as discriminatory. Discrimination based on physical beauty when searching for jobs is also the main reason why China's cosmetic surgery industry continues to rise and it has been the world's 3rd largest cosmetic surgery market since 2018.

I have experienced it directly, and I can guarantee that some aspects of the traditional culture and society are far from being gone. As you all have may noticed, I prefer to have a very "casual" look and I rarely wear any make-up, but this is not causing me any problem at H&S. However, when I was working in China, after a meeting with a client, the boss called me in her office to reprove me for not wearing make-up. She told me that in that context it was inappropriate and made her *diu mianzi le*, meaning that she felt ashamed about it. In fact, in addition to my professional competences, to show respect to her and to the clients, to which I am subordinated, I should have adopted the right *li*, which includes not only kindness and assertiveness but also a pleasant aspect.

Probably I received this treatment as a woman, and the same would not have happened if it was a male colleague to take part in the meeting not wearing a suite. In fact, this demand to conform to the beauty model applies especially to women. Traditional Chinese society, as the Italian one, is a patriarchal society: men are responsible for the wealth of the family while women, subordinated to men, should stay at home and take care of the house and kids. So, gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. But in China more than in Italy, subordination of women to men also meant that women have to look beautiful to satisfy men. Beauty was then identified with "feminine". In imperial China existed a manual for the courtesans and concubines called "The manual of beautiful women". It described the old criteria of *meiren*. Among them the most representative of beauty as an expression of women subordination was the practice of foot binding, the custom of applying tight binding to the feet of young girls to prevent them from growing creating the small and delicate "lotus feet". Far from being only a sign of beauty, the lotus feet made walking very hard for women, and also guaranteed that the girl was not going to leave the house. Today China moved towards a more equalitarian society, but, culturally speaking, it continues to be a masculine country and beauty is still a must have for women."

Marco: "What do you mean exactly by masculine country?"

Chiara: "Let me try to briefly explain the difference between masculine and feminine countries. Masculine countries strive for a performance and corrective society that support the strong, whereas feminine countries aim for a welfare and permissive society that help disadvantaged people. Another contrast is that feminine culture considers beautiful what is small, the environment should be preserved and conflicts resolved through negotiation and compromise. In masculine cultures, big and fast is beautiful, the economy should keep growing and obstacles such as conflicts should be resolved by fighting and strength. Great differences are also noticeable regarding education. In masculine cultures, since parents expect their children to be the "best boy

in class”, there is more competition and children are expected to excel both in studies and sports.” Marco: “Then it’s perfect! If China and Italy are both masculine countries, we can choose a testimonial that embodies the “best boy in class” features, and the message will be appropriate for both Italians and Chinese. Don’t you think so?”

Chiara: “I am not sure about it. I have noticed that the masculinity of Chinese society implies a feminine connotation of beauty and puts emphasis on “femininity”, and ultimately leading to the “feminization” of male beauty. If you observe Chinese male actors, models and pop stars you will notice that they look beautiful more for their “feminine” features, like perfect and radiant skin and shiny long hair, rather than for their masculine traits, such as an athletic body. We have similar trends in Korea that shares the same Confucian culture, but the same concept would be hardly accepted by westerners.

Once I had a funny conversation with my Chinese colleague. I saw that she was using as phone wallpaper the picture of a guy which pushed me to ask her if it was the picture of her boyfriend. Then she laughed and timidly told me that he is a famous Chinese pop-star considered to be one of the most handsome guys by Chinese girls. However, from my Italian perspective, I didn’t see anything exceptional in his beauty to the point that I really believed he could have been her boyfriend...”

Marco: “Very funny situation, but can we find something that the two cultures have in common and focus on that?”

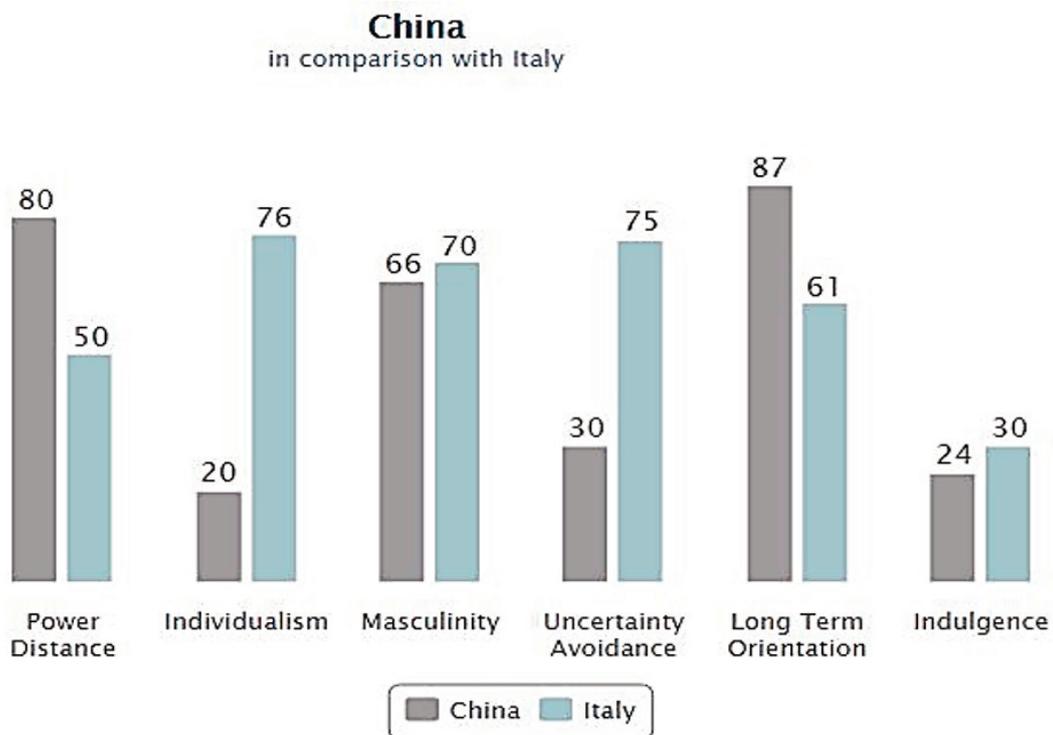
Chiara: “The two countries share some common cultural aspects, like the importance of the family, the masculinity, a long history and civilization etc., but I still think the cultural differences cannot be ignored. Let’s take the long history of both Italy and China for example. Many people like to compare the long history of the two countries, and many speeches of representative of Italy in China or of China in Italy make reference to it. In fact, the Roman Empire was the cradle of European civilization, while the Chinese Empire at the same time was the cradle of Asian civilization. However, the Roman Empire collapsed; since then Italy was not any longer a united country and it suffered countless wars and invasions. China instead continued to be a United Empire and even if it was ruled by different dynasties and the transition from one dynasty to the other was not painless, the culture, the language, the social structure didn’t change much throughout history. We should also notice that usually one dynasty was on the throne for centuries, while the transition from one regnant to another in Italy was faster. This led to a different perception of uncertainty in the two countries and a different extent to which the members of the two cultures feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. Italian culture is characterized by strong uncertainty avoidance, the need for explicit rules and formality is especially emotional. On the opposite hand, Chinese culture is a weak uncertainty avoidance culture, unpredictability or uncertainty are simply viewed as normal facts of life and rules are more flexible since they are not considered essential. There is also a correlation between level of anxiety and tendency to show emotions. Strong uncertainty avoidance countries, like Italy, are generally expressive cultures: showing emotions, talking loud or using hands while talking are all ways to release anxiety and

tension. For this reason, people from these countries may give the impression of being emotional or aggressive, while members of weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, like Asians, seem more quiet, easy-going, controlled or lazy. A motto that can well express the two contrasting views is “what is different is dangerous” versus “what is different is curious.” This difference is also reflected in the role of teachers: in strong uncertainty avoidance countries, teachers are seen as experts who have all the answers, and people expect them to use cryptic academic language, while in weak uncertainty-avoidance countries it is generally accepted that teachers may possibly not know all the answers, and teachers themselves try to use plain language and ordinary words even when explaining difficult issues.

I believe we should take into account all these aspects while creating our campaigns and adapt them to the cultural background.”

Marco: “What you are talking about is very fascinating but I wonder if your point of view is objective or just influenced by your personal experience in China and your humanistic background”.

Chiara: “If you still don’t believe me, open the search engine and look for Hofstede’s cultural dimensions model... Here you can see that what I am talking about can be classified according to a specific taxonomy that also allows to quantify and measure cultural values... It’s more than just a humanistic approach.”



Source: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/>

Chiara: *“As you can see Italy and China score quite differently on several of these indicators. The two Ads reflected these cultural differences, and that’s precisely why they succeeded in communicating our value proposition in such different markets.”*

Marco: “Chiara, can you please describe this graph?”

Chiara: “My pleasure, Marco. Let me start from **power distance**, China scores a value of 80, which lies in the high range. In China, it is generally believed that inequalities amongst people are acceptable; there is great reliance on centralization and formalization of authority, and great tolerance for the lack of autonomy. On the other hand, with a score of 50, Northern Italy tends to prefer equality and a decentralization of power and decision-making. Control and formal supervision are generally disliked among younger generations, who demonstrate a preference for teamwork and an open management style. However, opposite to Northern Italy is Southern Italy, scoring quite high in the PDI. Since individuals acquire their mental software first of all in the family environment, a first view of the dependence relation can be seen in the parent-child pair. Chinese children, living in an extended family, are taught to be obedient to their parents, and to be respectful toward grandparents and older relatives since the respect for elderly is a basic virtue that not only characterizes childhood, but it lasts through adulthood. Differently, Italian children are more or less treated as equals as soon as they are able to act; consequently, when children grow up, they start relating to their parents as friends, or at least as equals. The relation parent-child, based on inequality in the Chinese case and on equality in the Italian one, is then reflected in the other pairs, first in the teacher-student one, and then in both the pairs of doctor-patient and boss-subordinate. The educational process in China is teacher centered, whereas in Italy it is student centered. In the first context, teachers are treated with respect and deference even outside school; moreover, they are never publicly contradicted or criticized. On the contrary, in the student centered context teachers are supposed to treat students as equals and expected to be treated as equals; therefore, in Italy, it is acceptable and common to see students arguing with teachers, or openly expressing disagreement and criticism. As for the pair doctor-patient, while in China doctors are seen as superiors and treated with deference, in Italy they are treated as equals and consultations are based on informal exchanges. Further, the subordinate-superior relationship tends to be polarized in China, as organizational power is centralized in few hands; the hierarchical system is based on existential inequality, with a considerable dependence of subordinates on bosses. On the other hand, in Italy, the hierarchical system is considered as an inequality of roles, which are established for convenience and which may change in the future. Organizations are generally decentralized, and subordinates and superiors consider each other as existentially equal; there is in fact a narrow salary gap between the top and the bottom of Italian organizations, whereas wider salary gaps characterize the Chinese system.”

Marco: “What about the second indicator? I can see the difference is impressive”

Chiara: “It is! In fact the second indicator shows the difference between individualism and collectivism. As I said before, China is a highly **collectivist culture** where people act in the interest of the group and not necessarily in their own, in exchange for loyalty. At a score of 76, Italy is an

Individualistic culture, “me” centered, especially in the big and rich cities of the North. The difference in thinking in terms of “we” in collectivistic cultures, and in terms of “I” in individualistic ones is the direct consequence of the different family structure in which children grow up, extended family in China, and nuclear family in Italy. Chinese children learn not to take their bearings from others when it comes to opinions, and not to have direct confrontation since it is considered rude and undesirable. On the contrary, Italian children learn that confrontation is important and speaking one’s mind is a virtue; in addition, having personal ideas and objectives in life is considered very motivating; therefore, children are expected and encouraged to develop opinions of their own, whereas a child that always reflects the opinions of others is considered to have a weak character. Differences between Chinese and Italians concern also the importance given to work goals: the Chinese highly value training opportunities, seen as possibilities to improve one’s skills or acquire new ones. On the other hand, Italians look for jobs that are challenging but which allow considerable freedom in choosing one’s personal approach, and which give sufficient free time to enjoy family and leisure.”

Marco: “Well noted. But I see that the two countries have almost the same score for masculinity. Right?”

Chiara: “Yes, at a score of 66, and at a score of 70, China and Italy are both masculine societies, success oriented and driven. However, the path to success differs between the two countries. Chinese sacrifice family and leisure time to gain success at work; for example, service people will provide services until very late at night, or be open every day. Further, in the hope to obtain better jobs and salaries, farmers are willing to move thousands of miles away from their families. Chinese students care very much about their exam scores and ranking as this is the main criterion to measure success; therefore, competition between Chinese students is very high from a very early stage. Italian children are also taught that competition is good but they do not consider exam scores and ranking as the main criteria of success achievement. The main arena where Italians can reach success is the workplace; hence, strong competition is normal among work colleagues and less in school. Finally, both Chinese and Italians tend to show their success by acquiring status symbols such as luxury cars and the like.”

Marco: “So, can we just focus on this point the two culture have in common?”

Chiara: “But as you can see there is a gap between the two countries show for the other indicators. Let me analyze, for example, the dimension of **Uncertainty Avoidance**. With a score of 30, China positions itself in the lower range, whereas Italy scores quite high in comparison (75). The need for predictability in the Italian society is reflected in the importance given to formality and in the complex set of written rules, of which the Italian penal and civil code are a prominent example. On the other hand, although laws and rules are important in Chinese society, adherence to them may be flexible, since Chinese are more pragmatic and more tolerant of ambiguity; this trait is also reflected in the Chinese language which is full of ambiguous terms that change meaning according to context. In the Italian educational context, ambiguity avoidance is reflected in students feeling more comfortable in structured learning situations. Children from a very early age

get used to feeling comfortable in structured environments. Furthermore, due to the combination of high Masculinity and high Uncertainty Avoidance, Italians consider life difficult and stressful; as a consequence, they need frequent relaxing moments, such as long pleasant meals, or frequent coffee breaks. In the Chinese workplace, on the contrary, concern is more on strategy and process, instead of operations and decision content.”

Marco: “What about the last two indicators? The scores look pretty similar”

Chiara: “Well, considering **long-term orientation**, both countries are long-term oriented and characterized by values such as perseverance, thrift, having a sense of shame, and ordering relationships by status. Then, looking at the **indulgence** dimension, with a low score of 24, China positions itself at one extreme of the indulgence dimension, and Italy’s position, with a score of 30, is quite close. Hence, both countries have a tendency to cynicism and pessimism. However, although restrained societies do not put much emphasis on leisure time and highly value one’s self control, in Italy, unlike China, leisure time is still considered as a significant part of life, especially in terms of one’s work goals.

Chiara: *“I think that the two campaigns have been accurately developed taking into account the two different cultures.”*

Marco: *“Look, this all sounds very interesting indeed, but I still don’t see all these elements in the two ads. They look pretty similar to me...”*

Can we help Marco spot cultural differences in the two ads?

Annex I

The Italian and Chinese Advertising Campaigns

Let us have a close look at the two H&S campaigns. First of all, both campaigns involve celebrities as brand testimonials. In fact, in China, many H&S advertising campaigns involve celebrities such as actors, actresses, and famous singers. By selecting the most influential celebrities of the period, H&S successfully communicates the three most important product promises: remove dandruff, leave a refreshing and cool feeling, and protect scalp.

The 2017 China campaign features the famous actress NiNi, who is shown in the company of a sector expert. As the expert suggests giving scalp the same attention that is usually reserved to facial skin care, the advertising helps consumers make the connection between scalp and skin-care routine, the latter being especially important in Chinese culture.



Figure 1. Head&Shoulders campaign with the actress NiNi (倪妮)
(Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6dr9zLr9SQ>)

The Italian campaign featured the very famous Italian goalkeeper, Gigi Buffon (Figure 2), as testimonial. The choice of the testimonial was very significant since sport plays a big role in Italian culture. In the first part of the advertising, the scene shows the worried goalkeeper as the football match is going to start. Focusing on the mix of feelings that is typical of a game start, and then the intense emotions of the match, the advertising builds a relation with a broad segment of consumers, since football is by and large the most popular sport in Italy, played and followed by men and women of any age. After the match ends, Buffon takes a shower and the H&S shampoo finally appears. Compared to the first part, the second part of the advertising is based more on direct communication: like in the Chinese ad, the three benefits of the shampoo are illustrated. In the end, Gigi Buffon leaves with a smile as he is satisfied with the successful game and pleased by his fresh look.

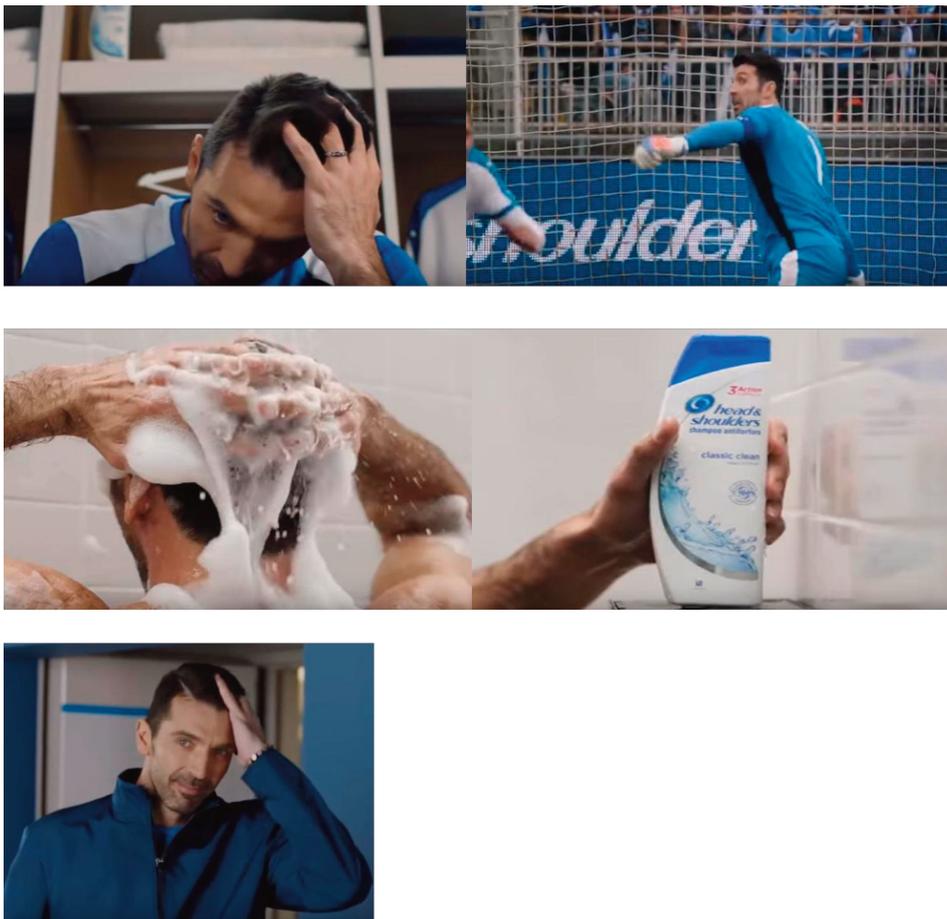


Figure 2. Head&Shoulders campaign with the Italian goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon.

(Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFXDpBksoY4>)

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