

Mapping Four Decades of Research on Advertising Higher Education in Mainland China: A Thematic Review of 1,605 Journal Publications

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Abstract: This paper utilizes CiteSpace to analyze 1,605 journal articles from the CNKI database. It employs a keyword timeline map to visualize the academic landscape and knowledge framework of Advertising higher education research in Mainland China over the past four decades. The results indicate that research in this field has progressed from an exploratory stage to a specialization-driven developmental phase, and more recently, to a transformation period addressing new challenges. Recent trends highlight a shift towards topics of digital transformation, new liberal arts education, and application-oriented education. In light of national strategic shifts and the rise of digital marketing, a central issue for Advertising education research is how to integrate academic knowledge to enhance both frontline teaching and societal development.

Keywords: Advertising education, Mainland China, Topical evolution, CiteSpace

1. Introduction

The development of applied disciplines is pivotal to Mainland China's higher education and plays a crucial role in achieving the goal of building a "strong educational nation". Advertising education, as a microcosm of this development, has followed a distinct trajectory over its forty-year construction, diverging from traditional disciplines. The knowledge production in Advertising education reflects both the trends and challenges of applied higher education in Mainland China.

In this study, we used CiteSpace to conduct a bibliometric analysis of 1,605 journal articles on Advertising education, visualizing the knowledge structure, historical evolution, and shifting hot topics in this field. Based on this analysis, we reflected on the limitations of current research and propose potential improvements for both the theoretical and practical development of Advertising education in Mainland China.

2. Methods

We selected the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) journal database as the data source. Using the search terms "(education + teaching + cultivation + talent + curriculum) * advertising OR advertising education + advertising teaching + advertising talent + advertising curriculum OR (education + teaching + cultivation + talent + curriculum) * advertising discipline", we established a thematic cluster related to Advertising education research. The initial search, conducted on January 1st, 2024, retrieved 2,905 articles. After excluding non-academic publications and unrelated papers, the final sample comprised 1,605 articles.

We adopted an integrated approach combining machine-based analysis with manual review to explore the academic development of Advertising education research in Mainland China. Using CiteSpace 6.2.R4, the study maps keyword occurrences and frequencies over a timeline, depicting thematic evolution. Complementing this, a manual analysis of key articles traced the progression of knowledge production and identified patterns shaping its development.

3. Results

Given the long time span of the sample, the time slice length was set to 3 years in CiteSpace to minimize potential errors, with a selection criterion of Top 50% (i.e., the top 50% of literature with the highest citation frequency over a 3-year period). The Pathfinder Algorithm and the Pruning the Merged Network strategy refined the visualized results, while other parameters remained at default settings. The resulting timeline map is shown in Fig.1. Based on keyword occurrence and frequency, the development of Advertising education research in Mainland China can be divided into four stages:

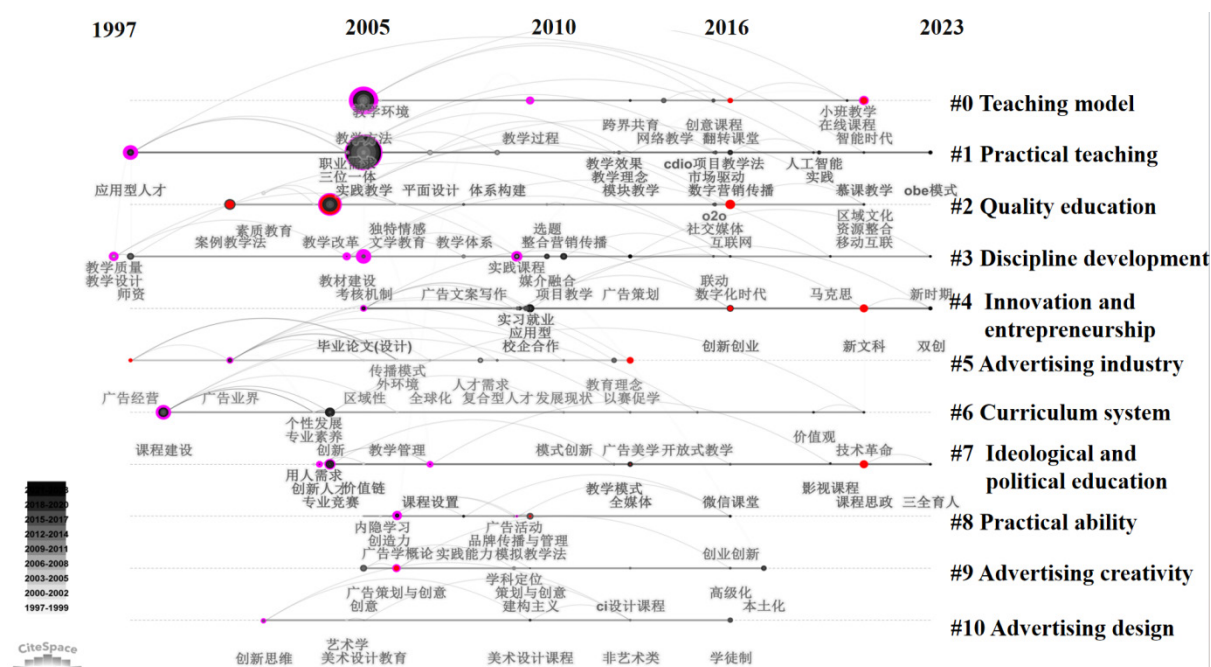


Figure 1. Keyword Timeline

Phase One: The Emergence of Advertising Higher Education (1979-1996).

After the reform and opening-up, China's higher education system shifted from focusing on political service to supporting economic development, emphasizing market-driven talent cultivation. This shift led to the rise of applied disciplines, including Advertising, which expanded rapidly as the industry grew, creating demand for skilled professionals. Meanwhile, Communication studies and Marketing were introduced into Chinese universities, providing the foundation for Advertising as an academic field. In 1983, Xiamen University launched China's first Advertising program, marking the start of formal Advertising education. Over the next decade, a structured teaching system gradually developed. Nevertheless, Advertising education remained in its early stages until 1996. It relied heavily on industry collaboration and resource sharing, facing significant resource shortages in curriculum design, faculty development, and program goals. While efforts were made to address teaching challenges, academic exploration was fragmented, lacking a coherent theoretical framework.

Phase Two: The Foundations of the Knowledge Production System (1997-2005).

After the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China proposed the "Science and Education to Prosper the Nation" strategy in 1995, the expansion of universities and the growth of enrollment were spurred nationwide. At the same time, China's economy accelerated globalization, and international competition in the Advertising industry intensified, increasing demand for high-end talent. Driven by higher education reforms and the rapid development of the Advertising industry, Advertising education became a key area for university expansion. According to the Ministry of Education, the number of universities offering undergraduate Advertising programs grew from 32 to nearly 200 between 1999 and 2005, making it the largest sub-discipline of Journalism and Mass Communication¹.

While the strengthening of Advertising Education during this period was unprecedented, the blind pursuit of scale expansion led to contradictions in educational practices. Since 1997, scholars reflected on issues from the surge in universities offering Advertising programs, such as unclear disciplinary positioning, disordered curriculum, insufficient faculty, and lack of resources. In response, the China Advertising Association commissioned the Beijing Broadcasting Institute to conduct a research project on The Demand and Cultivation of Advertising Talent in China, publishing the first academic work to explore models for cultivating talent.

As academic output increased, research teams from various universities began emerging. Xiamen University, Beijing Broadcasting Institute, and three other universities established the China Advertising Education Research Association in 1999 and held the China Advertising Education Seminar to summarize experiences from Advertising education since China's reform and opening-up. Pioneering research results were released, discussing the positioning and development of Advertising Education and attempting to addressing emerging problems. Key terms such as teaching, curriculum, and talent became research hotspots (see Fig. 1), and Advertising Education gradually became a focus of Mainland China's higher

education research.

During this period, the research was still in its infancy. The volume of academic work was scarce, covering a limited spectrum of subjects, primarily centered around summarizing teaching practices without offering much theoretical depth. Furthermore, collaborative efforts were minimal, involving only a handful of institutions and researchers. The field had yet to witness ongoing contributions from individual scholars or influential research groups.

Phase Three: Expansion in Academic Scope and Depth (2006-2015).

After ten years of rapid growth, the expansion of Advertising programs in Chinese universities began to stabilize by 2005, evolving from chaotic development into a more structured educational framework. During this time, China's advertising sector increasingly aligned with global markets, driven by more intense capital movements and heightened competition². While the supply of talent had reached its peak, the demand for specialized professionals remained robust. Concurrently, educational reforms shifted the focus from expanding the number of graduates to improving talent quality. Against this trend, Advertising education faced dual challenges from the transformations within the industry and education system, with unresolved issues and emerging contradictions intensifying the pressure³.

During this period, academic research addressed challenges such as unclear program objectives, disorganized curricula, and inconsistent teaching quality. Scholars built on earlier studies, introducing new theoretical frameworks, methods, and perspectives. Research focused on curriculum design, teaching models, and talent demand, reflecting key concerns of the time (see Fig. 1). Although closely tied to practical teaching concerns, these investigations lacked long-term vision and theoretical depth, limiting their overall impact.

Simultaneously, more advertising educators tackled emerging challenges, engaging in innovative academic inquiries. At the meso level, scholars emphasized revisiting program goals to better align with national priorities and industry shifts. They also highlighted regional disparities in Advertising education, proposing strategies that leverage local economic strengths and university resources. At the micro level, scholars proposed solutions like industry-university collaborations, competitions, and study tours to cultivate versatile, interdisciplinary talent. These studies, reflected in key terms like globalization, regionalism, interdisciplinary talent, and practical teaching (see Fig. 1), provided a holistic analysis of advertising education's potential as a knowledge service system.

Overall, Advertising education research in the mid-2000s experienced accelerated growth in both scope and depth. The volume of research increased significantly, with a wider range of topics explored and more robust methodologies employed. This progress was fueled by a heightened academic focus and the evolving socio-economic landscape.

Phase Four: The Navigation of Challenges and Breakthroughs (2016-present).

In the 2010s, China's macroeconomic policy shifted focus from "growth" to "structural adjustment", prompting a reorientation of the humanities and social sciences to better align with societal needs and national strategies through the development of "new liberal arts". Advertising education confronted two main challenges: determining how it could contribute to the country's transformation and responding to the disruption caused by the digital revolution². As digital marketing began to replace traditional advertising models, the very foundation of Advertising education was shaken. Amid these shifts in government, academia, and industry, Advertising education faced a crisis, necessitating a new direction within the restructured framework of the digital age.

In this period, scholars concentrated on the disciplinary transformation in Advertising education, advocating for programs to align with national priorities such as "consumer guidance" and "global brand expansion"². However, the rapid rise of digital marketing technologies created a gap between traditional Advertising education and industry advancements. Despite this, significant progress was made in digitalizing curriculum design and teaching models. Scholars suggested solutions for developing educational platforms based on cutting-edge technologies like artificial intelligence and mobile internet. While these studies lacked in theoretical depth, they were vital in improving teaching quality. Keywords in Fig.1 such as technological revolution, intelligent era, artificial intelligence, and mobile internet reflect this research orientation.

Additionally, Advertising education explored teaching practices within the context of the "new liberal arts", seeking interdisciplinary talent development models. Scholars also focused on the value-driven role of the "new liberal arts", proposing initiatives like "whole-person education" and "curriculum ideology and politics" to implement talent development plans. Keywords like new liberal arts, curriculum ideology and politics, whole-person education, and values in Fig. 1 underscore this focus.

As global competition escalates and digital industries advance, Advertising education research in China has entered a phase of significant transformation. The volume of academic output has surged, with emerging research topics and evolving methodologies. Despite this growth, the field continues to confront challenges such as a lack of theoretical depth, inflexible research methods, and narrow methodological frameworks, hindering a unified vision for the future of Advertising education.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the development of Advertising education research in Mainland China has been shaped by the interplay of academic institutions, industry forces, and government policies. The government has played a pivotal role in regulating the field, with national strategies and macroeconomic agendas guiding both industrial change and the growth of universities, thereby influencing the research priorities in Advertising education. As the academic and industrial sectors continuously evolve in response to external factors, they offer essential support and resources for advancing research. This model reflects both the unique characteristics of the era and global trends in higher education. Despite abundant academic contributions, much of the work remains focused on identifying problems and summarizing experiences, with limited innovation, strategic foresight, and practical guidance. This disconnect between the output and the broader goals of Advertising education presents a challenge: how to effectively integrate and innovate academic knowledge in the context of ongoing changes to enhance teaching quality and foster the development of a robust talent pipeline. Addressing this issue will be crucial for the future of Advertising education in Mainland China.

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