Discourse Analysis on the Changing Portray of Female Image in Advertisements

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Abstract. As a kind of ubiquitous communicating carrier and a strategic public discourse, advertising is supposed to manipulate consumers through the representations of belief, attitudes, dominance, etc., in discourse. The paper makes an attempt to gain insight into how the varieties of female images created in advertising in different era reproduce, restructure and challenge the social practice from critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective, in hopes of understanding the hidden ideology in advertising discourse and providing the public a different method to interpret the social identity of women.

Introduction
In 2015, a campaign named “Change destiny” was launched by a well-known cosmetic company which invited plenty of superstar as main characters. However, until in April 2016, the advertisement about the reversing attitude held by common leftover women got unprecedented success throughout China, its influence surpassed the previous 11 pieces of advertisements ever before and aroused great concern and heated discussion in the society.

“Advertising is the non-personal communication of information, usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products, goods, services or ideas by identified sponsors through various media” (Bovee & Arens, 1992). As an act of communication, advertising is an effective and indispensable part of commercial world, and has profoundly shaped and reflected the way of production, communication, and lifestyle of people. The omnipresent image of women in all forms of advertising has been adopted as an attractive element to persuade customers to take action, that is, to consume. However, the portrayal of female image keeps changing over time and bears the imprint of the ideology of the era. “Advertising is a symbol-manipulating occupation” (Hayakawa, 1964:268). As a kind of strategic discourse, advertising manipulates the public’s desire by manifest expressions through the representations of belief, attitudes, dominance, etc. in discourse. The research aims to make a critical analysis of advertising discourse, by summarizing the characteristics of the female image in advertising in different ages, to focus on the discovery of the ideological dimensions of such kind of discourse.

Research Background
Study on advertising language has long been the focus of linguists abroad. Such as G.N. Leech, (1966), Dyer, G. (1988), Tanaka, K. (1994), Cook, G. (1992, 2001), etc. Leech’s work has made detailed analyses of phonology, grammar and morphology in English advertisements. Dyer, G. holds that Advertising is a form of communication that constantly impinges on our daily lives, yet we are often unaware of its subtler form of persuasion, or of the extent to which it manipulates our (consumer) culture. His work Advertising as Communication sets out to examine advertising as a form of communication in contemporary society and places it in its wider cultural and economic context. Tanaka, K. initiates the pragmatic analyses of English advertisements and Japanese advertisements in the frame of Relevance Theory. Cook’s work is significant because it analyses an ad as a piece of cohesive discourse when a number of interactive linguistic and socio-cultural variables
are at work. Other scholars also contribute to the research from sociology perspective. Juliann Sivulka examines how American advertising both mirrors society and creates it. Jean Kilbourne is internationally recognized for her groundbreaking work on the image of women in advertising. She examines images in advertising with the incisive wit and irony that have delighted and enlightened her audiences for years. In China, some works of English advertising were issued from the perspective of lexicogrammar, syntactics, (Zhao Jing, 1992; Cui Gang, 1993; Qi Yunfang, 2003), culture, style, etc. The female image in Chinese advertising is usually studied in media communication, and feminism is the most common approach in the research which focuses mainly on the inequality between men and women as well as sexism. However, most previous research rarely probed into the power of advertising discourse in the social practice and the ideology it represented.

Social Background

Advertising is an over $200 billion a year industry. They sell a great deal more than products, i.e., values, images, concepts of success and worth, popularity and normalcy. They tell us who we are and who we should be (Jean Kilbourne, 2014). Advertising as a meaningful discourse has four functions: 1) conveying information; 2) persuading people to buy a product or use a service; 3) building an image; 4) stimulating consumption. (Li Juyuan, 2002). As R. White (2000) puts it, the role of advertising in society is to “inform, persuade, remind, influence, change opinions, even perhaps, to change emotions and attitudes.” Therefore, advertising is generally accepted as an important force of pushing society forward. (Li Juyuan, 2009)

Rapid social transition happened in China in the recent decades has stimulated changes of politic system, economic model, consumerism and social ideology. Meanwhile, social status and roles of women keep changing in China in the past several decades. Therefore, image of female widespread in advertisements, to a great extent, reflects ideology of society. Among the massive and complicated female images produced in media ads, they can be roughly categorized into the following groups, the “understanding wife and caring mother”, the “vocational white collar”, the “fresh students”, the “Glamour girl” and the newly created but impressive image “leftover women”. As the representation of social ideology, these female images appeared in ads one after another.

Theoretical Framework

Research on media discourse within the paradigm of CDA in the past 20 years has largely established the media as a social and discursive institution which regulates and organizes social life as well as the production of social knowledge, values, and beliefs through linguistic means (Van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 1995a; Fowler, 1996). CDA is a research result achieved by the blend of linguistic discourse with the social theory of discourse. Variations of language use in the media often constitute particular representations of the world, social identities, and relations, projecting certain versions of reality.

Fairclough (1995b) emphasizes the nature of practice of discourse, he defines discourse as “a mode of action, one form in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation”, which suggests that discourse is socially constitutive. The “critical” nature of CDA is not “to criticize” but to reveal the role of discursive practice in the maintenance of the social world. The research is based on three-dimensional methods of discourse analysis illustrated by Fairclough, which includes linguistic description of the language text, interpretation of the relationships between the (productive and consumptive) discursive processes and the text, and the explanation of the relationship between the discursive processes and social processes. Explanation of “social practice” involves analysis whose “objectives...is to portray a discourse as part of a social process, as a social practice, showing how it is determined by social structures, and what reproductive effects discourses can commutatively have on those structures, sustaining them, or changing them” (Fairclough, 1989)
Case Study

As discussed previously, an analysis of discourses in Fairclough’s framework is an attempt to understand ways of representing different aspects of the world in discourse, including representations of social events, processes, social actors, and so on. In the analysis in this section, I focus specifically on how the representations of female in advertising reproduce, restructure or challenge any existing orders of discourse in social contexts.

With the first piece of advertisement coming out on Jan 28, 1979, China’s advertising industry was reactivated in the 1980s. So the research on female image in advertising is supposed to start from 80s. As the medium and carrier of commodity information, advertising is the discursive practice that direct and construct the social identity of women. The analysis should be carried out according to the several typical female images produced in advertising to explain the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes, i.e., how the discursive practice in advertising represent and construct the social practice and push it forward.

“Understanding Wife and Caring Mother”

Such image mainly appeared in the advertisements from early 1880s to the middle of 1990s. In 1884, one piece of advertisements about washing machine presented representative and classical image of Chinese women, in which an old granny was washing clothes exhaustedly by the river in a village, with sweat dripping on her face. Then her daughter came back with new-bought washing machine as a present. In another one, a middle-aged woman, as a daughter, a wife, and a mother, coped with all kinds of difficulties to come back for family reunion. Then the whole family sat together and enjoyed the wonderful feast and the alcohol (the commodity) happily (alcohol is indispensable part on important occasion in Chinese culture). The female image in the both advertisements is mother or wife who is understanding, considerate, industrious, plain, and most important of all, family-centered. They take the responsibility of taking care of the old and the children to ensure the family complete and warm.

The understanding wife and caring mother in advertisements in this period was the mainstream of female image, typical and overwhelming, which was the result of transform of social structure. The government gave priority to heavy industry, attached great importance to economic construction, and intended to develop tertiary industry. Therefore, women were supposed to take less intense and less competitive jobs so as to have enough time and energy to take care of family. The force of such discursive practice in ads influenced and channeled the social practice of female, i.e. their options on occupation in society. From 1978 to 1991, the number of women in tertiary industry increased by 10 million with the rate 55 percent on the rise. As Thompson (1987:519) defines, power of discourse is “the ability to act in pursuit of one’s aims and interests and to intervene in the sequence of events and to alter their course”

“Vocational White Collar”

Confident, independent, and intellectual female image became popular from mid 90s to 2005. Take a piece of advertisement about soda “Sprite” in 1997 as an example, in which a successful, popular super singer got panic because of the stress when facing the thousands of passionate audiences. She didn’t know how to perform better. At that critical moment, her colleague passed her a bottle of soda, humming the lyrics “come on, come on, give me feel……”, to encourage her to stand up bravely. In the end, she achieved great success in the concert. The advertisement shows us a lady striving for her own social identity and success in career but not just confined in the warmth brought by family life.

Female image in ads are the representations of the social change in this decade. As the reform of the state-owned enterprises were upheld and deepened, the coexistence of different economic structures stimulated the participation of youth, esp. the well-educated ones. “White collar”, as a newly developing social group, can be easily found in ads. The independent, confident, and capable “vocational white collar” changed the human mind slowly but surely. Women began to walk out of family to face the fierce competition and challenge. In 1998, the 8th National Conference of Women
Representatives of China was held in Beijing. The general goals for women’s development in China by the year 2010 was put forward in the working report of the conference. They are to further implement the basic policy of equality of women and men, to further authorize women with equal rights in political, economic, cultural, and social affairs, to improve the general quality of women’s life, to achieve overall progress of women by wide participation. As a result, more female went back to campus for further education. According to statistics, from 1991 to 1999, the number of postgraduate students increased from 18973 to 63492, and the number of doctor candidates rose from 2309 to 11945.

“Fresh Students” and “Glamour Girl”

Since 2005, “fresh students” and “Glamour girls” overwhelmed the screen successively. In 2008, in the advertisement “Youlemei milk tea”, which is constituted with several fragments of a girl’s first love story. At the romantic moment, sitting on the bench at bus stop, chatting in the coffee bar, or reading books in the library together, the girl was quiet, shy, obedient, and sweet when her boyfriend was around. Then the image, “Glamour lady” began flourishing in ads. In 2008, in the advertisement of LG8080, a beautiful lady stood by the window, striking a pose of “S”, letting her hair flying with wind; then another picture came, a lady was lying in the bed, stretching her arms and legs in a relaxing but sexy way. Her lips and breasts were highlighted under the camera. Different levels of nudity or exposure of women’s bodies glamorize the sexual images in ads.

These absolute different female images occurring in the same period represented that “idols of production” were replaced by “idols of consumption” (Leo Lowenthal, 1985). In 2003, the average GDP in China was over $1000, the mode of consumption changed from survival to self-development then enjoyment (Zhuanghui Wang, Xiaodong Wu, Li Fan, 2011). Advertising functioned as the stimulus to make female appreciate their beauty than ever before, and encourage women to spend more money on health care, beauty, cosmetics, adornment, and digital products. Even though these images are criticized that women objectify themselves as the one vulnerable, submissive, or attractive to lose dignity. However, a stronger voice is that female becomes more independent, brave, and less bounded to display their social identity and independence.

“Leftover Women”

“Leftover women” is also called “3S ladies”, means: Single, Seventies and Stuck. Women in the advertisement are well-educated, independent, beautiful, and confident but remain single. To be unmarried over 30 is no longer a shame for the ladies, esp. for their parents. It shows that in 20s in this century, women will not get married for marriage and will not compromise if they have not met their Mr. Right. The reason that the ad drew such a great attention is it changed the belief held by people in a comparatively conservative country. The influence of the advertisement is not only to sell products but to change people’s mind, construct their social identity, then bring development of the society. The certain changes are about to take place with the attention payed by the government, institutions, and common people.

Summary

The study has explored the discursive construction of female image in advertising and its impact on social changes in several decades. Advertising, as an effective and influential media, provides commodity information, meanwhile is the representation of social construction and social identity. Discursive practice in ads can directly and indirectly hinder or promote the social practice, which reproduces, restructures, or challenges the existing order of social practice. From “understanding wife and caring mother” to “leftover women”, the image produced in advertising did help contribute to the construction of social relationships between people, and the construction of systems of knowledge and beliefs.

The study opens the space of study of critical awareness in reading and interpreting advertising
texts. The critical perspective could foster the possibility of cultivating the ability of revealing the social attitudinal meaning and social change implied in advertising.

References

