

Strategies for Constructing Female Advertising Images: A Study Based on 10 Commercial Short Films

Yitian Zeng

Jiaying University, faculty of arts, Meizhou, 515000

Z1T13833820868@163.com

Abstract

With the development of deep mediaization, short videos subtly shape audience cognition, and the female images in advertisements also influence consumers' perceptions of women. Female consumption has sparked various social hot topics. By studying the construction of female images in advertisements and analyzing advertising promotion from a gender perspective, we can reassess the portrayal of gender images in advertisements. This helps us better understand how symbolic meanings in a society of spectacle bind consumers. This paper aims to promote the construction of female advertising images by exploring the patterns of female image creation in advertisements and their impact on consumers.

Keywords

Female advertising; image construction; advertising image.

1. Introduction

With the widespread adoption and development of digital technology, media have deeply embedded themselves into people's daily lives, becoming an integral part of user experience. Short video platforms have also become important venues for advertising placement. The advertising industry has long been lauded as the "rearview mirror" reflecting reality, acting as a social mirror that portrays the changes of the times. Through visual and textual symbols, it disseminates information and becomes a significant representation of the era's changes. The construction of advertising images, particularly in the context of the "she economy," has seen numerous breakthroughs compared to the past. However, controversial advertisements that offend female images still frequently arise. How to properly portray female images in advertisements remains a crucial issue that needs to be explored.

2. Literature Review

Currently, most existing research tends to focus on the transformation of advertising image construction during the shift between different advertising media. It suggests the existence of one-sided stereotypes, such as the difference between advertising images in traditional print media like newspapers and magazines and those in new media. In recent years, the focus has shifted to the social impact and effect conversion brought about by female advertising, with little attention paid to the transformation of female image construction and its impact on consumers. This paper focuses on the issue of image construction in female advertising and the ideological constraints that brand consistency theory imposes on consumers' traditional ideologies, which holds significant theoretical importance.

2.1. Female Advertising

"Female advertising," also known as "female empowerment advertising," began to gain public attention in the 1960s as American media and brands began to emphasize and reassess

women's issues. The term first appeared on the website SheKnows in 2014, defining female advertising as "advertising that showcases modern women's talents, messages, and images, empowering women and girls" (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). The earliest instance of female advertising can be traced back to 1968 when Philip Morris launched a cigarette brand targeted at female consumers—Virginia Slims. The series of advertisements depicted women as superheroes or confident career women, highlighting the brand's stance on gender equality. Compared to other advertisements, the most prominent feature of female advertising is its advocacy for breaking and questioning the stereotypes of women created by advertisements, using supportive messages and images to empower women (Eisend, 2010). A series of successful female advertising campaigns has proven the tremendous benefits embedded in female empowerment advertising (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016). Recent research has focused on encouraging "realistic" advertising creation that reflects the real-life challenges and demands of female workers, promoting ads that tell the stories of more ordinary working women, thereby creating an advertising ecosystem more conducive to the survival and development of women (Wang Tian, 2023).

2.2. Image Construction

Research on images has a long history. Early related research perspectives mainly include Western philosophy (e.g., Miller et al., 1960; Wittgenstein, 1986), social psychology (e.g., Schlenker, 1980), comparative literature (e.g., Leerssen, 2007; Barrell, 2001; Wang Yunhong, 2018), and so on. Today, they mainly include critical discourse analysis influenced by social constructionism (e.g., Zhou Xinyu, 2016) and pragmatic studies (Ren & Guo, 2020; Chen & Jin, 2022; Yang Xiaomin, 2018). Overall, the academic understanding and recognition of images have experienced a shift from essentialism to constructivism (Jin Yingzhe, 2021), leading to a "discourse turn" in image construction research (Chen Linlin, 2018). From a social constructionist perspective, images are not "innate" nor static, but can be constructed, managed, or repaired through discourse. However, related research appears to be relatively fragmented and subjective, mainly due to a lack of targeted, operational analytical frameworks.

3. Research Design for Strategies of Female Advertising Image Construction

3.1. Sample Selection

This study uses the IAI China Advertising Yearbook as the sample source, selecting female advertisements from 2014, the year when the concept of female advertising was officially introduced, to 2024. By examining the overall changes in female advertising images within the yearbook, this study aims to grasp the general characteristics of these changes. Over the past decade, there have been more than 1,000 cases, with 831 being female advertisements. These female advertisements were classified into ten different categories, from which one advertisement was randomly selected from each category at varying intervals as the specific samples for this study. Specifically, the ten advertisements listed in Table 1 are selected as the research samples:

Table 1: Ten Advertisement Samples

Award Year	Advertising Company	Ad Title	Ad Category
2015	CHANEL	"Just Want to Have You"	Beauty and Fashion
2018	Mercedes-Benz	"She's Mercedes"	Automobiles and Related Products
2020	Huawei	"In a Woman's Heart"	Communication and Electronic Products

2020	China Minsheng Bank	"Labels Don't Define Me"	Service Products
2021	YAZ	"Life Is Mine"	Healthcare and Wellness
2023	Yili	"Princess Knows the Princess's Joy"	Food and Beverage
2024	Diaopai Laundry Detergent	"China Women's Volleyball Team"	Home Appliances and Daily Necessities
2024	Tencent Mandarin Town	"Ode to Courage"	Public Service Promotion
2024	Mama Network	"Get Lost, Stroke!"	Media, Culture, and Education
2024	Longfor Paradise Walk	"WOMEN: We Speak"	Building Materials and Real Estate

3.2. Measurement Indicators

This study references the five analytical indicators from the paper Research Report on Female Images in Chinese TV Advertisements by scholars Liu Bohong and Bu Wei, published in 1997. In combination with the analysis in the yearbook, the characteristics of consumer culture, and the actual needs of this study, the research is conducted from four perspectives: ad category, ad format, role image, and role relationship.

First, Ad Category: This examines the frequency and popularity of female images in advertisements across different product categories. Based on the directory of the IAI China Advertising Yearbook and the actual content of the advertisements, the categories are broadly divided into the following ten types, As shown in Table 2, advertisements featuring women can be categorized into ten different narrative themes.

Table 2: Advertisement Categories

Ad Category	Operational Definition
Food and Beverage	Snacks, alcohol, beverages, tea, etc.
Beauty and Fashion	Skincare products, cosmetics, clothing, jewelry, etc.
Automobiles and Related Products	Cars, electric vehicles, automotive parts, etc.
Communication and Electronic Products	Mobile phones, electronic products, digital devices, etc.
Service Products	Finance, insurance, tourism, cultural entertainment, etc.
Healthcare and Wellness	Health products, medicines, medical devices, etc.
Home Appliances and Daily Necessities	Home appliances, furniture, daily necessities, etc.
Public Service Promotion	Public service ads
Media, Culture, and Education	Official promotional videos, educational content
Building Materials and Real Estate	Real estate, building materials products

Second, Ad Format: This refers to the methods used to present the product in advertisements, As shown in Table 3, the following seven types are included:

Table 3: Advertisement Formats

Ad Format	Operational Definition
Narrative	Presenting the product through storytelling
Emotional	Presenting the product through emotional expression
Realistic	Presenting the product directly
Humorous	Presenting the product in a humorous way
Demonstrative	Directly showcasing the product itself
Authoritative	Presenting the product through celebrity endorsement
Exaggerative	Exaggerating the product’s features

Third, Role Image: The image construction of female roles in advertisements As shown in Table 4 analyzed from the following six aspects:

Table 4: Character Representations

Role Image	Category
Age	Girl Young woman Middle-aged woman Elderly woman
Profession	Student Housewife Service industry worker Leadership Celebrity/influencer Science, education, culture, and healthcare Unknown profession
Clothing	Revealing or not Tight-fitting or not
Body Type	Slim Medium Overweight
Makeup	Bare-faced Light makeup Heavy makeup
Temperament	Confident and poised Sweet and cute Quiet and introverted Neutral Calm and mature Cool and dark

Fourth, Role Relationship: This explores the characteristics of female image construction from the role relationships in female advertisements, examining whether the role is passive or active, dependent on a male role, or an independent individual.

3.3. Analysis Results of Sample

3.3.1. Diversification of Role Representation

Traditional advertisements often portrayed women as housewives or in other roles dependent on men. The emergence of feminist advertising challenged these entrenched gender role divisions, introducing an elite female image in advertisements. However, this also led to the creation of another stereotypical female image. With the spread of "post-feminism," characterized by "individualism" and "anti-feminism," audiences' mindsets shifted, and the portrayal of women in advertising began to break free from the elite image mold, moving towards more diversified role settings. Women in ads could now be ordinary workers, housewives, or athletes, emphasizing that outstanding female characters are no longer confined to top-tier professionals or white-collar elites—admirable women can be found across various industries.

For example, in 2018, Mercedes-Benz broke the tradition of male-dominated car commercials by featuring seven women from different professions as the leads in their ad, conveying the message, "Meet your match, see yourself." In 2020, Huawei produced an ad titled *Inside a Woman's Heart*, addressing the pressures women face in both family and career, encouraging them to live freely without burdens. That same year, Minsheng Bank's ad *No Matter How Many Labels, They Are Not Me*, featured a girl participating in a taekwondo competition, encouraging women to take the initiative and break free from stereotypes. In 2021, Yasmin released a video ad titled *Life Is Mine*, focusing on women's personal feelings and rights. In 2024, Diaopai collaborated with the Chinese women's volleyball team to showcase diverse female images, blending brand philosophy with the spirit of the volleyball team, celebrating the perseverance and determination of women. Also in 2024, Mama.com created the special feature *Get Lost, Stroke!*, breaking away from the traditional approach of portraying a harmonious family environment in maternal and child advertising. Instead, the ad tackled the gap in maternal and child health education, promoting the importance of folic acid intake to prevent stroke, aiming to educate and resonate with women through creative empathy and unique situational awareness.

3.3.2. A More Comprehensive Age Representation

Feminist advertising has often focused on portraying middle-aged women, resulting in the marginalization of other female groups. Any extreme depiction or portrayal of a particular female group contradicts the original intention of feminist advertising, only further marginalizing underrepresented women. Over time, the representation of women in advertisements has become more comprehensive, encompassing all age groups, allowing the entire female demographic to be fully visible.

For example, Yili, in collaboration with Disney's 100th anniversary, released the short film *The Happiness of a Princess is Known by a Princess*. The film moved beyond the traditional ending of a princess being with a prince, instead presenting a narrative where the princess determines her own diverse life path. This ad broke away from the traditional feminist advertising focus on career-successful middle-aged women as the main storyline, shifting the focus to young girls, safeguarding children's innocence and addressing the emotional needs of consumers across all age groups.

3.3.3. Richer Story Backgrounds

The rapid dissemination of feminism via the internet has garnered increased recognition and support. However, patriarchal culture, which has long held a dominant position, is still deeply rooted in people's minds. During discussions on certain issues, patriarchal thinking unconsciously influences audience judgment. In some ads, the lack of female voice due to an imbalance of power leads to the portrayal of women's independence through cliched narrative techniques, resulting in a superficial challenge to patriarchy.

However, as time progresses, more and more female-focused advertisements are becoming aware of these issues. They dare to address previously taboo topics, leading to richer and more sincere storytelling that resonates with female consumers, directly appealing to their emotional needs. For example, in 2024, Longfor Tianjie capitalized on International Women's Day for an integrated marketing campaign, clarifying misunderstood terms like "socialite" and "miss," advocating against the stigmatization of women. Tencent's Mandarin Town released the ad Ode to Courage, focusing on the educational challenges faced by rural girls, drawing on the inspiring story of Principal Zhang Guimei, addressing the urban-rural education gap, and showcasing the strength of female rural teachers, all while promoting digital learning environments to support rural education.

4. Critical Reflection on the Female Image in Empowerment Advertising

The positive impact of female-targeted advertising on the spread of feminism and the awakening of women's consciousness is undoubtedly commendable. However, we cannot overlook the ideological pressures that empowerment advertising exerts on women, both in terms of consumption and emotions. While such advertising may have replaced the traditional male-centric aesthetic with a form of female empowerment, it often leverages the concept of empowerment to merge women with products from the perspective of brand-self congruence. This results in the commodification of women's consciousness, where women, believing they have escaped the control of a patriarchal society, are in fact trapped in a fantasy created by the collusion of capital and mass media. In this scenario, women remain objects of consumption, swept up in a frenzy of consumerism.

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