

A Study on Bias Against Women in Advertisements

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Abstract: In the era of digitalization and globalization, advertising wields an even greater impact on modern society than ever before. While feminism has challenged the male-dominated society for decades, one can still observe the persistence of gender stereotypes, especially sexist discrimination, influencing the representation of women in the media. This paper aims to critically examine several advertisements for daily necessities, analyzing their content and impact to investigate specific patterns of discrimination against women in the modern advertising industry. In terms of structure, this paper will address the following issues: First, it will provide a brief review of recent research on motherhood and the male gaze. Then, it will analyze specific examples of advertisements, discussing the contested female images they portray. In particular, this research will focus on pressures related to gender roles, sex discrimination, and the male gaze as three typical issues. Finally, we will offer suggestions for the advertising industry and content creators. The goal of this paper is to present a clear picture of the persistent gender issues within advertising today and propose ways to address them in the future. By analyzing the framework of advertisements and their cultural implications, this research will shed light on a more comprehensive examination of the misrepresentation of women in the media.

Keywords: Bias, Chinese advertisement, Motherhood, Male gaze

1. Introduction

In recent times, the advertising sector has experienced rapid growth, permeating our daily lives with increasing influence. The spectrum of advertising formats encompasses depictions of families, children, and women. Within this context, the issue of gender discrimination against women in advertising has been a subject of discussion and debate for several decades, gaining escalating significance in contemporary advertising research. Biased female images have been repeatedly reproduced in prevailing advertisements, either explicitly or implicitly, drawing scholars' attention to female stereotypes in the contemporary advertising industry. This article aims to illuminate the issue of female stereotypes in these types of advertisements by conducting an analysis of the portrayal of women in four prominent adverts with substantial societal impact. These selected advertisements

span across food, pharmaceuticals, and everyday essentials—elements ubiquitous in our daily routines, exemplifying the positioning of female imagery within advertising landscapes. Although stereotypes have been a prevalent topic in academia and extensively discussed in previous research, few of these studies have delved into and categorized the distinct patterns of female stereotypes in advertisements, particularly in East Asia. To fill this gap, our comprehensive analysis will explore these four selected advertisements to identify recurring patterns and derive informed insights regarding the portrayal of gender inequality in advertising. Our aim is to draw attention to the issue of gender inequality within advertising and its implications for women. Furthermore, it aims to create an environment that encourages the advertising industry to engage in introspection regarding gender issues with a more critical perspective. The paper concludes with a number of recommendations for the advertising industry to avoid perpetuating such degradation towards women.

2. The Review of Bias Against Women

Sexist content in advertising has long been a significant topic of study in media research. Numerous advertisements perpetuate gender stereotypes, often associating women with traditional domestic roles. It is a prevalent practice in advertising to highlight the implicit link between women and household duties while excluding them from professional or workplace settings, traditionally viewed as men's domains. Furthermore, concerning the content of these advertisements, mothers depicted in them frequently prioritize the needs of their family members over their own, relegating their personal needs to a position of lesser importance. Such a framework in advertising emphasizes the role of women as full-time homemakers. It reinforces stereotypical views on gender: caring for the family is a woman's innate responsibility, thereby promoting an image of the "perfect" mother. The dissemination of such content can further solidify society's expectations of women and, to some extent, suppress the development of women's diversity.

While people are paying more attention to women's rights, there are still advertisements that contain such assumptions about the responsibilities of motherhood. According to a study conducted in 2019 [1], when examining a sample of advertisements, it was found that very few samples included the image of fathers in the narration and conveyed their specific roles in the family. To be more specific, out of 125 ads from 2000-2009 and 89 from 2010 to the present in GH, only a handful featured men in fatherly roles. A similar trend was observed in AWW, where only 20 out of 139 ads in the 2000s and 38 out of 203 ads in the 2010s portrayed men as fathers.

The aforementioned data makes it evident that problematic portrayals of motherhood serve as a critical aspect of gender stereotypes in advertising. Regarding female careers in advertising, one can observe that the female image has long been associated with housework and childcare. At the same time, it has not been portrayed in fields such as high technology, industrial production, and sports [2]. Remarkably, excluding women from specific careers has had a substantial economic consequence. Over the past decade, this exclusion has resulted in a staggering \$1 trillion reduction in the GDP of low- and middle-income countries. This issue goes beyond just women's rights; it affects the overall development of the world.

The issue of the male gaze is also prevalent in advertisements. Firstly, let's define the male gaze. According to objectification theory, the implicit and explicit sexual objectification of the female body in Western culture produces a multitude of negative consequences for women [3]. The primary psychological consequence of sexual objectification is the development of an unnatural perspective on the self, known as self-objectification. Women who self-objectify have internalized observers' perspectives on their bodies and chronically monitor themselves in anticipation of how others will judge their appearance and subsequently treat them [3]. In such advertisements, women are objectified, and men hold dominant positions as they gaze at women. These ads often depict women dressed in a manner intended to please or attract men, portraying women as objects of desire or targets

of pursuit. Even in the realm of sports, women have frequently been relegated to token roles or portrayed as beautifiers, always positioned as outsiders. This is evident in examples like the movie *A League of Their Own*, which, while based on a true story, primarily focuses on women filling in for men who were away at war. In such narratives, women are cast as cheerleaders rather than being central to the storyline.

3. Bias in Advertisement

3.1. The Pressure of Motherhood

In recent years, motherhood has become a widespread topic in media studies. The definition of motherhood, as a woman's role in raising children and reproducing them, has been widely embedded in narratives across media, reinforcing a stereotypical image of women. This definition permeates our daily lives, including advertisements. For instance, a Chinese children's medicine advertisement called "Shu Xiu Xiu Ai Youer Capsules," produced by Shu Xiu Pharmaceuticals, shapes women's identity within the framework of motherhood. The content employs the first-person perspective of a mother to describe the benefits of the medicine, claiming its effectiveness in quickly releasing children's pain. At the start of the advertisement, the phrase "Mum knows" in the advertisement implies its target audience is mothers and reinforces the idea that mothers bear primary responsibility for their children's health. Towards the end of the ad, it features images of women with children but lacks any male characters in the scene.

In this children's medicine advertisement, women's concerns about their children's physical health are intricately woven into the narrative. The storyline revolves around a change in the mother's emotions. We witness the mother's worried expression transforming into comfort as her child recovers with the aid of the medicine. This transition from tension to relief satisfies the viewer emotionally. Throughout the advertisement, the image of the mother is consistently present. She takes her child to the hospital to address the child's health issues and is conscious of the emotional labor within the family. The absence of males in advertisements for child-related products is not uncommon. In other ads, one can often see a woman holding a child, accompanied by slogans like, "A woman can be seen holding a child in her arms," implying that women are primarily responsible for childcare [4]. The content structure of this advertisement further reinforces the notion that mothers are tied to their families, perpetuating the idea of women's responsibility for family care.

This issue has been recognized by numerous scholars in past few decades. In 1970, TiGrace noted that "in advertisements and commercials, women are shown exclusively as sex objects and reproducers, not as whole individuals"[4]. This statement highlighted the problem: that women were beginning to awaken to their own identities, becoming less easily influenced. However, this hasn't fundamentally altered the situation, as advertisers continue to hold outdated views of women. According to Associate Professor Teresa Davis, only around fifteen percent of adverts in AWW feature men. She writes that mothers' knowledge and expertise are still largely confined to the realms of consumption and family life [2]. Hence, this persistent problem is unlikely to be resolved in the near future.

Women's motherhood plays a crucial role in shaping the notion of the "ideal family" in Chinese visual culture [5]. Despite the various ways in which families are formed in reality, mothers have consistently symbolized two attributes in visual culture: patience and selfless devotion [5]. By reinforcing this image of the perfect mother, patriarchy has disciplined women's existence and further perpetuated the stereotype of women solely responsible for raising children within the family.

3.2. Male Gaze

The stereotype of women is also reflected in the male gaze. In some advertisements, designers and filmmakers secretly put women in a lower level of identity and perspective. The male gaze describes a way of portraying and viewing women that empowers men while sexualizing and demeaning women. This is a very vulgar gender discrimination, which represents the unequal treatment of women in the relationship between men and women and social roles, and also shows that in this society under the rule of law, there are still some leaders and people with radical and backward thoughts, perhaps they are not aware of it.

In 2020, Once released, the new advertisement of Fu Yanjie has been opposed by many people, and the obvious sexual innuendo and male gaze have caused everyone's discomfort. Its original advertising and marketing theme is health and hygiene, which is the original intention and reason for the establishment of this brand. With the progress of The Times, the content of this advertisement has shifted to the loss and confusion of women in the relationship between men and women. In it, the two colors of "pink" and "black" are metaphors, but they are very direct and explicit expressions of the "classification" of the hidden part of women. This implies that women are in a weak and service position in their interaction and sexual life with men, causing women's sexual anxiety and classifying women in a very vulgar way, thus making them increase pressure and buy this cleaning product.

The fundamental reason is that the planners of the Fuyanjie advertisement did not equate the image of women with the image of men at the beginning, which led them to believe that the purpose of women cleaning their private parts is to please men, and to determine the classification of women's private parts on their own, which is a tragic reflection of women under the condition of men.

Another advertisement is for the 711 convenience store. In the advertisement for mini wine and lemon tea in the 711 convenience store in the Guangdong area, there are uncomfortable words. "Get drunk and have a chance," and so on. These advertising slogans on the surface is to promote the effect of alcohol is very strong but it is high degree and can be drunk girls connected together. This leads to a direct display of purpose for women. This also puts the illegal behavior of some obscene men getting drunk and having sex with women in the open, which is bound to cause everyone's opposition.

So why did the male gaze emerge and persist? The male gaze can be traced back to two main vectors: social encounters and exposure to media. Social encounters include the unwanted catcalls and looks that women may receive. On the other hand, exposure to media sets unrealistic body standards that surround women in their everyday lives. In a world where the average woman earns about 80% of a man's salary, the last thing we need is someone telling us how to dress. Even if women can overcome the harsh beauty standards set by society and walk into the workplace confident in their skills and appearance, they will still feel the effects of the male gaze in professional Settings. A study has found that women's confidence is not appreciated in the workplace. Instead, you see, looks are.

Furthermore, the stereotype of women is also reflected through the sexist narrative where females are portrayed under the male gaze. The concept of the male gaze describes a way of portraying and viewing women that empowers men while simultaneously sexualizing and degrading women [6]. This further causes gender discrimination and the unequal treatment of women in the context of gender roles and relationships. To be more specific, females are subject to male dominance and authority while they have no subjectivity to decide what to do, which means a sexualized way of portraying women.

In 2020, the advertisement of Fu Yanjie, the new product of 2020 Spring, one of the most famous brands of female products in China, encountered significant backlash due to its vulgar language and stigmatization of females. The initial theme of this brand's advertising and marketing was centered around health and hygiene, which is also the concept of this brand. However, the content of this advertisement shifted towards portraying women's loss and confusion in their relationships with men.

The use of the colors "pink" and "black" in the ad served as metaphors but were very direct and explicit representations of the categorization of women's intimate parts. This implied that women held a submissive and servile role in their interactions and sexual lives with men, causing anxiety among women and crudely classifying them. This, in turn, created pressure on women to purchase this cleaning product. The reason why advertisement makes female feel insulted is that women's need has not been really respected. The planners of this advertisement did not initially consider women's intimate care on an equal footing with men's. This led them to the mistaken belief that the sole purpose of women cleaning their private parts was to satisfy men. Consequently, they assumed the role of deciding how to classify women's intimate areas. This reflects a troubling depiction of women as subordinate to men.

Another advertisement, this one for 711 convenience stores, is narrated from a male's perspective. In the advertisement for mini wine and lemon tea in 711 convenience stores in the Guangdong area, there are unsettling phrases like "Get drunk and have a chance (to have sex with her)." The advertisement language was insulting since it disregards women's sexual consent. This results in a direct and objectifying portrayal of women, indirectly normalizing inappropriate behavior where some intoxicated men engage in sexual encounters with women. Naturally, this has sparked significant opposition.

So, why has the male gaze emerged and persisted? Social encounters encompass unwelcome catcalling and leering that women may encounter. On the other hand, media exposure sets unrealistic beauty standards that women are constantly surrounded by. In a world where women earn approximately 80% of what men do, the last thing needed is someone dictating how to dress. Even if women manage to overcome society's stringent beauty standards and enter the workplace confident in their skills and appearance, they still experience the effects of the male gaze in professional settings, where their competence is often overlooked in favor of their physical appearance. In essence, their looks take precedence over their abilities.

3.3. Discrimination against Women

Throughout history, women have endured persistent discrimination, often attributed to perceived disparities in capacity and physical attributes compared to men across various domains. This bias against women's capabilities manifests in numerous spheres, spanning leadership, structural dynamics, strategic roles, cultural norms, organizational climate, and HR policies [7]. Such discriminatory attitudes have cast a long shadow over various aspects of women's lives, extending from professional and academic pursuits to familial roles and societal expectations. Degradation towards women can also be widely found in the education and professional sectors, where they are often considered inherently inadequate. Scholars have drawn intensive attention to the public attitudes women encounter while pursuing careers in STEM fields. They have found that gender-based stereotypes act as barriers for women in STEM disciplines, contributing to ongoing discrimination and the limited representation of women in these professions [8].

The prejudiced perception of women extends from crystallized thinking to visual culture, particularly in advertisements, reproducing and reinforcing stereotypical female images in audiences' minds. This detrimental attitude is well illustrated in a 2013 Snickers advertisement in South Korea, which vividly demonstrates how women have been marginalized in the sports domain. The advertisement employs contrast to highlight the supposed function of Snickers: physical rejuvenation. At the outset, the scene features fatigued female players donning tight red dresses and alluring yet impractical high heels, signaling that they are ill-suited for sports. Following the consumption of a Snickers bar, they instantly transform into energetic individuals clad in sweatshirts, actively participating in sports once again. This depiction reinforces the stereotype that women are inept at

sports and always prefer wearing dresses and high heels, perpetuating their exclusion from athletic pursuits.

The Snickers advertisement distinctly adopts a male-centric narrative perspective, systematically devaluing the image of women. This aligns with the culturally idealized portrayal of a masculine character [9]. Even within modern society, the deeply ingrained patriarchal system results in women living under constant scrutiny from a male standpoint. The advertisement further amplifies this bias through its presentation of women, which is inherently sexist. The incongruous attire of tight dresses and high heels positions them as outsiders on the playing field, simultaneously making their untimely entrance a subject of scrutiny for both onlookers on the track and those engaging with the advertisement.

4. Conclusion

Despite the significant impact of the feminist movement on modern society, which has reshaped the representation of women in media, there remains a substantial amount of bias and discrimination against women in advertisements. The primary focus of this article is gender inequality, achieved through a critical review of the sexist content and narratives embedded in advertisements.

Four influential advertisements, spanning a wide range of products, were selected for study. By examining the narrative frameworks underpinning these selected advertisements, this article identifies three patterns of discrimination: the degradation of women's capabilities, the emphasis on women's roles as mothers within the family, and the objectification of women. These advertisements specifically depict women as lacking physical prowess in sports, as burdened with the exclusive responsibility for household duties, and as objects intended for the fulfillment of sexual desires.

The objective of this article is to further elucidate the specific patterns of gender stereotypes in advertisements through an exploration of the portrayal of women in advertising. It aims to shed light on the often-overlooked ethical gender issues prevalent in contemporary advertising.

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