

A Comparison of Female Images in Advertisements Between China and Japan

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the differences and similarities between the images of women in Chinese and Japanese advertisements, analyzes the psychosocial reasons behind the images, and proposes suggestions and outlooks through content analysis and qualitative case studies, using the influential video advertisements of clothing, home appliance, medical beauty care, and vehicles in both countries in the past ten years as research samples. The study found that women in advertisements in both countries are objectified in appearance and rigidified in professional image. The phenomenon of reducing aesthetic bias in Japanese ads came earlier than that in China. However, professional women in China get more respect than those in Japan. With the rapid development of China's economic society and the increasing status of female subjects, feminist advertisements have grown and tended to be polarized at the same time. Women's independent personalities should be respected in advertisements. The media should guide the public to get rid of stereotypical perceptions of women, shape a pluralistic image of women, and build a harmonious society.

Keywords: Female image, video ad, objectification, stereotype, feminism.

1. Introduction

There is a relatively popular and tried-and-true golden rule in the creation of commercial advertisements, whether they are in the newspaper, on TV, or in new media. that is the "3B" principle - Beauty, Beast, Baby[1]. Among them, Beauty is widely used in both Chinese and Japanese commercials. Due to historical reasons, the societies of China and Japan have long been dominated by men, women in the two countries have been deeply embedded in families, and the society's aesthetic for women has also appeared the deformed standard of the "male gaze".

This paper will compare and analyze the female images in Chinese and Japanese advertisements from the perspective of cultural interpretation, and conduct a comparative investigation of the female images in the advertisements of the two countries through literature investigation, observation, and case analysis. This paper will analyze the similarities and differences in female images between Chinese and Japanese advertisements through three aspects: objectification, the stereotype of professional images, and extremism. Also, it will put forward the social reasons behind the advertisements and suggestions for improvement.

2. Objectifying Appearance and Respecting Confidence

Objectification is a tactic that many advertisements are good at and easy to use. It stimulates consumption by sacrificing the personality of some people to cater to the preferences of potential target users. Cosmetics and lingerie are the focus of women's consumption, and this chapter selects advertisements of the two countries' products at different periods to compare and analyze the part of them that objectify women.

2.1 Objectification phenomenon and evolution in lingerie advertising

1) Selection of sample criteria: Lingerie brands vary in development time and target consumers. The Chinese lingerie brand Cosmo Lady was founded in 1998, and as the leading lingerie brand in the country in terms of sales, it is the first lingerie company listed in Hong Kong stocks in mainland China. The Japanese lingerie brand PEACH JOHN was founded in 1988, and its annual sales reached 15 billion yuan ten years ago. Both are representative of the lingerie industry. This paper chose popular commercials (with more than 100,000 views) of Cosmo Lady and PEACH JOHN as a comparison to ensure universality. Both Chinese and Japanese brands were founded in the 20th century, targeting urban white-collar

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women, with the same lingerie price of about 100 yuan for each piece. The sample ads are from the 2010s to have a reasonable sample for observation and analysis when analyzing the evolution of the female image.

2) The Development of Lingerie Advertising in China—Taking Cosmo Lady as an Example: In this section, we will analyze the image of women in lingerie advertisements in China through Lin Zhiling's advertising campaign for Cosmo Lady from 2012 to 2017 as an example.

First of all, Cosmo Lady's ads have a very high impact, with a single reprinted ad receiving a whopping 720,000 views from the search records of the Chinese website Bilibili in 2016. Judging from the works in 2012, the lingerie at this time focused on fashion and display, embellished by ribbons. The tagline is "Come to Cosmo Lady and you'll look good[2]." The main body of the ad focuses on a close-up shot of the spokesperson tearing her jacket open to show her underwear and repeatedly zipping it up to catch people's attention. At the same time, the spokesperson is placed in a window with other models for people to see. The ad is using female sensuality as a commodity to please the male demographic, which causes the objectification of women.

However, from the works of 2013 to 2017, Cosmo Lady has continued to follow the trend of the times and pay more attention to the comfort of female consumers, rather than repeatedly emphasizing the fashion sense and seductive power of lingerie. The focus of the slogan also changed from "new" and "fashionable" to "healthy", "comfortable", and "meet better yourself", to shape the image of a confident and independent modern Chinese woman.

3) The Development of Lingerie Advertising in Japan - Taking PEACH JOHN as an Example: This section will analyze the female image in Japanese lingerie advertisements through the advertisements shot by PEACH JOHN from 2013 to 2020 as an example.

In the lingerie commercial shot by Haruna Kojima in 2013, the spokesperson played a female star. When she got out of the car, she was surrounded by a group of male reporters. She found that the skirt was caught in the door, so she tore the skirt off to show the lingerie boldly, and attracted more flashes and attention[3]. The ad has a whopping 700,000 views on YouTube. It can be seen that in the early 2010s, women were in a situation of "being watched", and the shooting of lingerie advertisements was mostly to show the "benefits" that women's bodies can bring - male gaze, and people can sense more about fashion than practicality, which is enough to reflect the objectification and disrespect of women in this ad.

In 2018, PEACH JOHN launched a promotional video about steel-free lingerie “ノンワイヤー (no wire)” interviewing working mothers, in which the mother said that she would not choose steel-free lingerie when dating or working, because there was no femininity and fashion sense, and that she would choose steel-free rings only when playing with her children for comfort. It can be seen that women have gained the right to choose, but they still show the plight of lacking fashionable and comfortable lingerie.

However, with the development of society, this trend has changed significantly. The advertisement for 2020 NICE BODY broke the shackles for women. They can choose the lingerie that suits them whether they are tall or short, fat or thin, whether their skins are black, white, or yellow. "A healthy body is a nice body." A plump girl also pointed out that she is "in good health"[4].

From the above cases, it can be seen that, whether in China or Japan, there was a serious phenomenon of objectification of women in women's lingerie advertisements in the early 2010s, but with the improvement of economic development, the phenomenon of objectification of women has shown a decreasing trend. Advertisements that respect women's bodies and demonstrate independence and self-confidence are more resonant with female consumers. From a materialized image that pleases others to an image that respects self-confidence is a mainstream concept change brought about by the improvement of women's economic strength, which in turn affects the trend of the advertising industry.

2.2 Objectification in Medical Beauty Advertisements

1) Medical Beauty advertisements in China: In 2017, an advertisement for the Gengmei APP emphasized that "Beauty is everything, and cosmetic surgery can make you beautiful." "Becoming beautiful can solve all the problems in life." In 2019, in the elevator advertisement of the Xinyang Medical Beauty APP, which covers major office buildings and residential areas, a group of girls with similar faces lined up to shout: "Women need cosmetic surgery, and a woman is complete when she is beautiful." In 2020, the advertisement for Qiaozhi Cosmetic Surgery Hospital gave the expectation of consumer products as "Unassuming and full of confidence" But in the end, "Your face is what your soul looks like." It was caught in the vicious circle that beauty is for others.

The three advertisements above are all trying to define beauty and label women. In such value transmission, women have lost their judgmental value as subjects. This phenomenon of objectifying women by constructing female "beauty" is not only reflected in people's daily life but also has penetrated people's unaware ways of thinking and values[5].

2) Medical Beauty advertisements in Japan: RIZAP, known as Japan's No. 1 private health center, released an advertisement for a weight loss service endorsed by Hitomi Satowu in 2019. In the advertisement, a plump woman sits on a small stool with a bottle of beer, highlighting the fat on her stomach, and her eyes are glassy. In the next second, the camera turns to the slim female spokesperson, who is sitting under the flash in a dress with men surrounding her attentively. Finally, the Slogan "幸せはここから" (be lucky from now on) appears after the female spokesperson kisses a man.

Similar to the medical beauty advertisements of the same period in China, which puts forward the view that women can only be appreciated by becoming beautiful or spending for beauty, it regards appearance as the only way to succeed. Objectifying women as ornamental objects

from the perspective of men ignores the inner source of self-confidence of the female.

Founded in 1988, Shinagawa Cosmetic Surgery Group is a well-known plastic and cosmetic hospital in Japan. For example, in its bariatric surgery interview promotional video released in 2020, there was a two-minute shot showing that female customers came for liposuction to lose weight because of "marriage style" and so on[6]. This is mostly because the men around the woman feel that the woman needs to lose weight. This causes the woman may feel ashamed if she wouldn't like to change her body shape, which is plump instead of unhealthy in fact. It can be seen that contemporary Japanese women are still under strict male scrutiny, especially the society's requirements for housewives, which also subtly objectifies the independent women themselves.

It can be seen from the above that modern medical beauty advertisements in China and Japan are kind of objectifying and disrespectful to women. The use of female images should be used with caution at a time when women's rights are increasingly valued, and blindly catering to medical beauty advertisements that allow women to be unwittingly labeled as male ornamental objects goes against the proper values of today's society. This paper argues that reviewing the existence of objectifying female content in advertisements, pleasing rather than demeaning consumer groups, and respecting a healthy and confident consumer mentality are the ways to successfully sell contemporary medical beauty products to women.

3. The professional image of a virtuous wife and mother is stereotyped

In addition to beauty or clothing advertisements, women also occupy most of the mother images in household goods advertisements. This section will examine and analyze the female images in Chinese and Japanese advertisements of household daily necessities from the images of housewives and subordinates.

3.1 The image of a good mother in Chinese advertisements

The image of a good wife and mother is still the ideal goal of most men in China today. Commercial advertisements, as a media dominated by men's discourse, express men's expectations for women, and the positioning of women's contributions are mostly limited to the family field, conveying to the public that women should work towards the goal of "good wife and mother"[7]. For example, advertisements such as the slogan "WEILI Washing Machine, Love for Mother" for washing machines imply that laundry and housework are for women exclusively. Some advertisements of daily necessities also appear to deny the concept of women's workability and value. For example, the copy in a poster released by Qingfeng Tissue in 2019, "Erase the center position in the workplace and live as a good mother[8]", is suspected of denying women in the workplace. In the same year, the sign on Meiling's refrigerator at Christmas, "Men like slim ladies," contains the value of erasing women's independent personalities.

Panasonic steam mop, with its lightweight characteristics, carries the slogan "Mom's superpower". These advertisements all portray women as housewives and disadvantaged groups to be protected by men. On the surface, this seems to be a concern for women, but it is deeper discrimination.

3.2 The subordinate image of a good wife in Japanese advertisements

The same phenomenon also exists in Japanese advertisements. In contemporary Japanese advertisements, in scenes of food cooking, laundry washing, house cleaning, and home appliance use, male images appear less frequently, while women are mostly wives who have done something wrong and have been corrected[9].

In the 2014 Panasonic Electric advertisement "Refrigerator + Washing Machine + Air Condition"[10], the male's sophistication and the female's clumsiness are also shown. The refrigerator chosen by the woman cannot be fully opened, while the man chooses the refrigerator that can be fully opened. An office worker on the tram was worried because the sleeves of the washing machine were not washed clean, while the man pulled the suit to show that the sleeves were clean to reflect the cleaning power of his washing machine.

Nowadays, Japanese women's right to enter the workplace and participate in social production has received certain policy support, but the practice and concept of gender division of labor in the traditional "Men lead outside the home, women lead inside" has not completely changed. Women in advertisements often appear as assistants to male leaders or employees who are incapable of solving problems and seeking help from male colleagues.

From the above, in China and Japan, the concept that women belong to the family and are economically dependent on men is still deeply rooted. The concept of male-dominated economic sources in the family is easy to separate women from the workplace. The idea that women should return to the family in advertisements cannot be adapted to the current economic situation in China and Japan. Respecting women and working mothers is not only about policy support and slogans but also about taking concrete measures to ensure implementation.

4. The Extremism and Balance of Feminism

4.1 Cars and feminist advertising

1) Female images in Chinese car advertisements: In recent years, the economic status of women has improved, and the number of female drivers has also risen. Some car companies have tried to use feminist advertisements to promote consumption. But there is still a trend of widening prejudice behind feminism in advertising.

The poster released by domestic Nezha Automobile on Women's Day in 2020 proposed "Break the shackles and be not anyone's accessory", which reflected the consciousness of independent women, but at the same time the slogan "How can a stylish woman sit in the

passenger seat "violated a major taboo in female advertising - one-sided definition of women. Treating the passenger seat as an accessory denies women own right to choose and independence of personality. It is believed that respecting women and equal rights for men and women should not go to extremes, and advertising should not interfere with individual choices.

The economic environment also has a greater impact on the advertising industry. In recent years, the economic status of Chinese women in the workplace has gradually improved, and women's awareness of independence and equality has also risen. Less rigorous advertisements are often condemned by public opinion. While breaking the concept that women can only be subordinated to men, car advertisements should be careful not to restrict women's independence.

2) Female images in Dongfeng Nissan advertisements: In the mid-1910s, Nissan's ads were similar to Chinese ads, with women appearing in almost all roles except the driver, such as the friend in the passenger seat or the mother in the back seat. There are problems restricting women's positions, but there is no extreme phenomenon of some feminist advertisements in China.

In Nissan's 2015 creative ad Moment Magic, women, regardless of age or height, change into a princess as soon as they touch a car, which means women who have a car will be confident and become princesses.

In the brand advertisement Dare, No Limits[11] released by Nissan China in 2020, there is a scene of two elderly girlfriends driving cross-country through the desert, reflecting the freedom, health, and confidence of women. In the same year, "Dongfeng Nissan Tian Lai 2020" was launched, and the scene of a female spokesperson driving a car using the one-click driving function and driving side by side with a man was selected, indicating that Nissan has gradually adapted to economic and social changes in the choice of the female image.

As a German brand, Volkswagen has images of female drivers in advertisements in China and Japan, but these female drivers are all played by Westerners. For example, "China Road, Volkswagen Heart" launched in China in 2004, and a TV advertisement in Japan in 2015 showed females driving on the grassland or walking with female companions. The phenomenon that women are not bound by position in Western culture inspires Chinese and Japanese car advertisements should gradually increase the proportion of women.

5. Conclusion

This paper takes the female image in Chinese and Japanese advertisements as the object, conducts horizontal and vertical comparative studies on the female image in cosmetics, clothing, home appliances, and automobile advertisements in different periods, and draws the following conclusions: In the past decade, the connotation of the female image in Chinese and Japanese advertisements has changed from absence to prominence, from singleness to richness, from symbolic to liberal, and the subject status and self-awareness of women have been increasing.

From a historical vertical perspective, with the development of economy and society, China, as a developing country, has gradually reduced the phenomenon of objectification of women as their economic status has improved, and as a developed country, Japan has absorbed more Western ideas, has relatively advanced ideas in respecting the aesthetic differences of women.

In terms of cross-sectional comparison, women are generally considered to be subordinate in the household economy because of the deep-rooted Confucian culture that permeates Chinese and Japanese societies due to their historical and cultural similarities. The economic construction of both Chinese and Japanese societies today requires the efforts of women. So, society and government should provide more support to working women.

On the other hand, the promotion of women's status in China in the last five years has been accompanied by the phenomenon of going to extremes, such as overemphasizing feminism and exaggerating the status of women, which has caused certain social problems. This also requires positive guidance from the media and the continuous attention of all consumers to provide mass support for the construction of a harmonious society.

In this paper, there is still the problem of a lack of long-term typical samples in the selection of specific analysis cases in China and Japan, that is, medical beauty advertisements are emerging industries, and advertisements are relatively fragmented and not a series. Considering that different brands have their business positioning and audience groups, there are also differences in advertising forms. In future research, the scope of brands will be narrowed to control the same audience groups in the same period, and more typical advertising cases will be retrieved, as well as the advertisements put by multinational brands in the two countries respectively, for a more accurate comparative study.

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