

# Research on Baudrillard's Advertising Theory Based on the Concept of "Image"

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## ABSTRACT

Different from the traditional research on advertising application theory, Baudrillard once defined advertising as a reproduction field operated by simulacra and code in his media criticism theory. In Baudrillard's "the system of objects", the image was used as a visual representation to cover the capitalist exploitation system, and became the basis of his criticism of the political economy of advertising. However, its semiotic methodology and other theoretical deviations and the trend of multimedia integration of advertising make the current theoretical circles be cautious about this view that has a huge impact on advertising theory. Starting with the concept of image mentioned many times in Baudrillard's advertising theory, and according to the analysis and criticism of advertising, this paper discusses the rationality and deficiency of the advertisement criticism proposed by Baudrillard based on the analysis base of the object system from three aspects: the image of the object and its value understanding, the role of the advertising collective and image, and the image of the advertising audience.

**Keywords:** Jean Baudrillard, media criticism, image, advertising theory

## I. INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of representative advertising theories in the 20th century (see "Table I"), advertising is generally regarded as a persuasive method, communication activity or marketing technique, and is closely related to the creators, the communication objects and paths, and the target market, brand and other elements. Advertising theories are mainly the research on the links, objects of advertising and marketing or the industry chain itself. This kind of research is not divorced from the bourgeois exchange system and market economy framework, that is, it is a research based on market rules such as production, sales, and exchange from the marketing perspective. After entering the 20th century, technological advancement has brought about increased productivity and material abundance, and the homogeneity of products has become more and more serious. The focus of advertising has begun to shift from the product itself to the added value of the product. Baudrillard is keenly aware of this. From Baudrillard's "System of Objects", "Consumer Society", "Criticism of the Symbolic Political Economy" and other works, it can be seen that he did not use communication or economics to analyze advertising ontology or advertising applications, but a political economic critique was carried out on the visual images flooded in current advertisements. Baudrillard believed that the true purpose of advertising was to

manipulate and deceive the public in order to conceal the essence of the capitalist exploitation system. Then, how was his criticism of advertising built up? Is this process absolutely reasonable?

TABLE I. REPRESENTATIVE ADVERTISING THEORY IN THE 20TH CENTURY [1]

Name	Time	Proposer
"population on paper"	The early 20th century	John Kennedy
"preoccupation right"	The 1920s	Claude C. Hopkins
Usp	The 1940s	Rosser Reeves
Inherent drama	The 1950s	Leo Burnett
Five stages of creativity	The 1950s	James Webb Young
Roi theory	The 1950s	William Bernbach
Brand image theory	The 1950s	David Ogilvy
Positioning theory	The 1970s	Al Ries, Jack Trout, Etc.
Integrated marketing communication theory	The 1990s	Don E.Schultz, Etc.

## II. ADVERTISEMENT IMAGE: FROM VALUE ENTITY TO THE FLOATING SIGNIFIER

The background of Baudrillard's advertising theory lies in the development of machines and the popularity of television advertising. As a narrator of consumption,

the object image becomes the most subjective and direct visual image of advertising facing the public. It can be seen from today's advertisements: no matter how gorgeous the verbal narration is, the image of the things narrated is always throughout the advertisement and occupies the visual focus. Here, the first thing the author wants to analyze is the image of the object in his advertising theory. The shadow of his teacher Roland Barthes can be clearly interpreted from his interpretation of the image of objects in advertisements. Roland Barthes, a representative figure of French structuralism, is a pioneer in applying semiotics to the field of visual communication. In "Mythology — Interpretation of popular culture" in 1957 and "rhetoric of images" in 1964, he vividly explained the relationship between semiotics and visual communication. In the paper "rhetoric of images" that focused on advertising, Barthes did not interpret the image itself, but mainly the sociological interpretation of the message conveyed by the image of the object in the advertisement, that is, the image in real life corresponded to the implied and secondary information behind the interpretation. He believed that advertising contained linguistics and pure image information, while pure image information included encoded image information and non-encoded image information. Non-encoded image information was the direct presentation of the object in the advertisement. The encoded image message contained multiple referents, such as the return of the market, the unique cultural attributes of Italy, and the meaning of aesthetics in the Italian Panzani advertisement. In Barthes' view, the object images in advertisements referred to the closely related life and culture, and the encoded image information levels were mostly symbolic, social and linguistic, and they were also referred to by reality.

It is similar to Barthes's "encoded image". Baudrillard thought that "image and discourse in advertisement were mostly allegorical expressions". Both of them regarded the image of object in advertisement as a kind of symbolic reference, which had deep and implicit secondary meaning information. Unlike Barthes, Baudrillard believed that the object image in the advertisement was just a symbol pointing to the floating chain of referents, the model of the object and the pursuit of the series. This object image did not lead to the real thing, but to the vague image in human's desire. The public's desire for consumption was evoked through the serial restriction of the object and the obscured object image. Finally, it was transformed into a pure signifier without signification, and relied on self-reference to obtain meaning and thus be consumed, so as to complete a kind of "mandatory signification and break formed in the concrete life connection" [2]. That is to say, the things shown in the advertisements did not have real realistic meanings, and the things they refer to were absent in reality, or the real

referents behind them were inaccessible. He saw the symbolic value of the object image in the advertisement, but he further expanded this view, and concluded that the object image in the advertisement was played with, and the fundamental purpose was to deceive, arouse desire and cover. On the one hand, he discarded the social and cultural reference of the object image in Barthes' advertising theory. On the other hand, he also denied the object entity corresponding to the object image in the advertisement, but abstracted it as a kind of shaper (or inducer) of consumer ideology.

It can be seen that the base of Baudrillard's judgment on the image of objects in advertisements (i.e. shadowing representation) is the symbolization of the value of objects. The meaning of the object in advertisement is very similar to that of the commodity mentioned by Marx. It doesn't refer to the natural object, but to the artificial object created by the human as the subject from the perspective of the subject-object binary opposition. However, different from Marx, he ignored the undifferentiated human labor condensed in the object. In his early theory, objects in modern society were divided into two levels: "objective original meaning" and "cultural meaning". Functional objects were the foundation of world structure, which was the "objective original meaning" of things. Its "cultural significance" belonged to the category of political science and aesthetics of material sense, and was "a quadratic meaning composition" [3]. Although the early "objects" had not yet been built on stilts, he had greatly distorted the functional attributes of objects, thinking that the functional value of objects was controlled by social morality. It can be seen that whether it is the "objective original meaning" of the objects or its "secondary meaning", Baudrillard regarded society and culture as the most important influencing factors on objects, thus interpreting the social orientation of objects. In a further abstract analysis, he included the relationship among people, the relationship between people and objects, and even the relationship between people and himself into the code, thus completely ignoring the indiscriminate human labor condensed in objects. He believed that the key of objects as consumer goods was signs.

The object itself was a symbol in the advertisement. In his later theory, Baudrillard believed that after the object had undergone the evolution of the symbolic object — functional object — symbolized object, the substance of the consumer society had been completely removed, leaving symbols pointing to deeper objects and human desires. Therefore, the image of the objects directly presented in the advertisement is a symbol, and does not convey the basic information and brand information of the object. It points to a perfect object constructed through a series of descriptions and visual images that fits the public's psychology. The focus is to arouse people's chasing desire, and this kind of

paradigm can never be clearly defined in reality, and is perpetually changing. Based on this, Baudrillard had a greater difference from Barthes. Instead of the interpretation of the object image in the advertisement to the actual socio-cultural reference or aesthetics, Baudrillard criticized it from the perspective of political economy. From this, people can already see the symbolic fetishism criticism. The fundamental logical premise of his analysis lied in the continuous expansion of the symbolic meaning of objects and people's endless pursuit of the extended meaning of objects. On the one hand, he saw the new situation in which objects were exchanged due to the value of signs after World War II. However, he gradually went to extremes, and made signs ontology, thinking that signs were the most real things. This series of analysis used semiotics as methodology. There have been many criticisms of this in China, so the author won't repeat them here. On the other hand, he broke away from Marx's analysis of commodity production links, and regarded the symbolic value of commodities as the only value dimension, thus ignoring the use value and exchange value of commodities, and converting people's real needs into the needs of comparison of symbolic differences. Based on the difference of human biology and the level of needs, there can never be pure symbolic value for the practical objects of daily life. Therefore, his understanding of the value of objects was very narrow, and as a result, his understanding of the image of objects in advertisements had also been biased.

### **III. ADVERTISING COLLECTIVE IMAGE: FICTITIOUS INTERMEDIARY**

In addition to the visualized image at the top level, Baudrillard believed that the collective image and collective principles projected in the advertisement was a "ghost-like collective": deception was formed by projecting false social sequence relationships. Baudrillard further emphasized that any desire cannot survive without the mediation of collective image projection. Without this level of projection of the image, it cannot appear. [4] He revealed the role of collective image in advertising: through the shaping of this collective image, a false collective desire was presumed to stimulate individual desire. Although Baudrillard did not explain what a real collective was, he understood the collective orientation of people in the consumption process. While affirming the innate collective unconscious, he also emphasized the anti-shaping and guidance of the innate collective unconscious by the society as a whole. Psychology has long studied this kind of innate collective unconsciousness. Carl Gustav Jung believed that collective unconsciousness played a basic role and was biologically inherited. This kind of unconsciousness was a universal psychology. He emphasized the similarity and potential convergence between people. On the basis of Jung, M. Bodkin

further demonstrated that collective unconsciousness was not only affected by biological factors, but also by social factors. [5] It can be seen that the collective unconscious has a potential influence on the individual unconscious at the external social and cultural level. Therefore, the virtual collective in the advertisement can have an impact not only at the unconscious level, but also at the cultural level.

However, Baudrillard recognized the influence of the collective on the individual. It was precisely based on this premise that he criticized the fiction and use of the collective image by advertising. Through repeated appearance, perceptual image projection, encoding and other methods, a random mark that cooperated with the collective image can gain public recognition and form a new coded collective image in this recognition. What the public is striving for is the recognition of the collective. In turn, people strengthen this collective image and collective hierarchy in the process of collective recognition. Baudrillard is inclined to start from a sociological point of view, emphasizing the negative role of collective images in advertising. It is the identity of this vague collective that causes the degradation of the public's psychology. It is not only easy to arouse the desire of the group, but also easily be internalized by the capitalist social system. It can be inferred that the person as the subject in Baudrillard's advertising theory is not only completely controlled by vision, language, and signs, but also easily influenced and induced by the collective unconscious, extremely lacking subjective initiative, and being irrational. In the analysis of the collective image, he kept silent about the rational dimension of man, exaggerated the decisive role of the perceptual dimension of man, and unilaterally declared the ignorance and unity of the modern subject while ignoring every decision made by modern people. And choices are free decisions made based on the principle of power first. Although Marx also analyzed the alienation of human beings, he criticized the alienation of human beings in the relations of production and did not deny the comprehensiveness of human beings. As far as the basic physiological structure of man is concerned, man is three-dimensional, multi-dimensional, rational and emotional at the same time. In particular, modern people who legislate with the theory of human justice after the collapse of "theism" are more capable of independent and rational thinking. The choice of objects in market economic activities is also based on their own comprehensive judgments. "Advertisement is selling concept", and this concept is based on the market's 'general will'. The 'concept economy' profoundly reveals the inner meaning of human economic life. The economy is always a conceptual expression of a certain life desire. [6] If advertising is deceptive and provocative according to Baudrillard's view, and is not based on the free choice of citizens, how can advertising without the

basis of market "public will" work paly its role? Is it relying solely on collective unconscious incitement? This is obviously hard to make sense.

From a psychological point of view, whether it is at the unconscious or cultural level, it is reasonable to affirm the role of the collective in advertising based on the influence of the collective image on the collective unconscious. The important thing is that although he sees the collective and public behavior, but ignores the broader collective dimension, namely, the collective sequence that exists in advertising competition. As a product of the market economy, each advertisement is in the collective competition of similar advertisements, and strives to highlight the uniqueness in the advertising sequence to gain the favor of the public. In this collective competition process, each advertisement needs to pay hard work and provide caring or festive atmosphere. According to his logic, what the advertisement touches is not the product itself, but to provide maternal care and a festive atmosphere to capture people through image and language rhetoric. And the true face of the product is obscured by "[desired] objects". Can the advertisements that provide maternal care will impress the public and greatly increase the sales of goods (commodities)? Obviously, it is not. There are a lot of cases where advertisements that have invested a lot of effort in the competition do not work at all. Don't these advertisements provide maternal care? Don't they provide the festive atmosphere? Don't they make effort to get the favor of consumers? From the current situation, each advertisement is carefully produced due to high advertising costs and fierce market competition. However, not every dedicated advertisement has moved the public, and some advertisements are even backfired due to excessive guidance. From the perspective of modern commercial advertising in collective competition, factors such as advertising concepts, product strategies, and market positioning cannot be ignored.

#### **IV. ADVERTISING AUDIENCE: CHASER OF SOCIAL DESIRE**

In his analysis, Baudrillard mentioned advertising audiences many times. There is no doubt that both the "mass" and the target audiences of advertisements are composed of independent individuals. However, in the process of analysis, he simplified the understanding of people in economic activities.

Baudrillard believed that in the process of being aroused and persuaded by advertisements, the public has invisibly cooperated with the production rules of the capitalist society and cooperated with the "conspiracy" of the capitalists for capital. The original desire is stimulated by the collective image projection, which is the way that the social system intervenes. The

social system transfers its repressive essence to a graphical way to convey it to the public, which makes the public lose their critical spirit and has no resistance to the entire social system. It can be seen that Baudrillard's view of advertising image as a sign of concealing the capitalist exploitation system is precisely based on his analysis of the transformation of the relationship between people and objects in a consumer society. "It changes from the relationship of 'need — satisfaction' to a purely symbolic consumption relationship"[7]. This conclusion is not only based on its judgment of capital-symbol manipulation in society, but also contains a basic judgment of people: modern people in economic activities are flat and perceptual people, who are not only easy to get infatuated with objects and have desires for objects, but also easy to be influenced by emotions such as anxiety, happiness, pride and vanity. They have no resistance consciousness to advertisement consumption mobilization. Advertising is to peddle the symbolic value of objects to people and lock people's acceptance of advertising in an illusory environment. In the economic activities and in this environment, people's quality, description and price of objects described in advertisements are ignored, and only similar emotional needs such as "maternal care" and "festival atmosphere" are paid attention to. As long as the emotion and care conveyed by the advertisement are needed, the object will be desired and then consumed. On the contrary, people's needs for the use value of the object in real life will be set aside and ignored. Because of the elimination of the use value of objects, people are completely irrational and constrained by social desires in his analysis of advertisements. The actual demand for objects has been compressed to the extreme, and they are already in the full colonization of symbolized objects.

It can be seen that he only paid attention to the human desires and ignored the actual needs. Since the beginning of modernity, whether it is a natural person or a person in economic activities, modern people are a combination of rationality and sensibility. It is impossible to have only sensibility or only rationality one-sided, and it may be more likely to have "bounded rationality" considered by behavioral economics. Therefore, people who are easily motivated by desires and are completely controlled by advertisements referred to by Baudrillard belong to extreme situations or are basically non-existent. On the other hand, in his analysis of the masses, Baudrillard criticized people's authentic demands as the starting point, and followed Marx's method of block analysis, thus making the masses block, holistic and abstract. However, the individual difference is completely ignored. He believed that "there is no so-called individual demand, and the demand has been 'appeared as an abstract social demand force' after the systematic decomposition and

coding of the entire production system" [8]. On the contrary, in the advertising practice in the context of a consumer society, it is usually necessary to refine the classification of the target audience, such as adopting different advertising strategies for the rational and emotional needs of the public. Baudrillard's classification is conducive to a holistic understanding and analysis of the public. However, individuals or small groups that do not conform to the overall law will be abandoned because they cannot be taken in, resulting in the abandonment of the diversity of the public and the single analysis.

Although people are not completely rational, their desires for objects in economic activities need to be investigated in specific environments and specific social relationships. Baudrillard's advertising theory, which criticizes the political economy of advertising, is unique, but it is precisely because he ignores the marketing links of advertising itself, and he misestimates the complexity of the effectiveness of advertising. This misjudgment is not only reflected in his analysis of the principle of the effectiveness of advertising, but also in its amplification of the role of advertising. He believed that advertising can promote the internalization of the capitalist social system. The premise of this conclusion is that advertising can work. Therefore, Baudrillard's analysis of advertising has repeatedly mentioned the inducing and persuasive effects of image and language on people's desires. There is a common sense. Generally speaking, any image needs to work through vision. Philosophers such as Guy Ernest Dobord have demonstrated the dominant role of vision in the consumer society. However, this does not prove that the impact of vision on people in economic activities has reached a decisive degree. People in economic activities still have a lot of decoding and marketing links in the process from seeing the objects in the advertisement to buying the objects. After receiving the stimulus of the advertisement information, they also need to go through the psychological filtering layer (attitude, belief, habit) and know the file (Information, needs, desires) and other personal perception links [9]. Baudrillard ignored the subjective influencing factors other than these advertisements, and regarded advertisements or visual and speech as the direct determinants of purchase activities, which was unreasonable.

## V. CONCLUSION

Historically, Baudrillard's critique of political economy has a certain epochal character. At that time, many theorists also held similar views, such as Raymond Williams and Habermas. Raymond Williams was similar to Baudrillard, and finally settled on a critique of capitalism, while Habermas paid more attention to revisions in the capitalist framework. "Williams attributes the charm of advertising to

audiences to artistic quality, while Habermas believes that the attraction of advertising lies in providing a symbol of social status." [10] The criticism of many thinkers and sociologists is a profound reflection on the crisis of capitalist development. Baudrillard's views on advertising were in the same line as his views on consumer society and the material system, so there was also certain pessimism. However, precisely because of its methodology and critical foundations, the lack of analysis of consumer society and other aspects is also reflected in its analysis and criticism of advertising. For example, the object image in advertising is also regarded as a symbol full of "conspiracy", whose essence lies in deception. In addition, because of his criticism from the perspective of political economy, it also ignored the complexity of advertising in the process of market competition to a certain extent. Therefore, people should think from a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional perspective when seeing the rationality of Baudrillard's advertisement criticism.

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