

Male Gaze and Self objectification: Analyzing The Lipstick Advertising

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ABSTRACT

The increasingly powerful advertising communication in modern society and the female consumption demand and the patriarchal consciousness have endowed lipstick with multiple symbolic meanings. By analyzing the lipstick video ads of major brands, we find that these brands, even the whole fashion industry, are disempowering women. Generally, we argue that lipstick and lipstick advertising are tools for men to exert power and doctrine at a micro-level. Still, they also reflect a transforming fashion industry in the face of rising feminist consciousness.

Keywords: *male gaze, self-objectification, social discipline, the fashion industry.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Lipstick, a cosmetic used on the lips to beautify, is popular among female consumers. According to *China Lipstick Market Analysis Report in 2021* [1], in the first half of 2020, lipstick occupied the largest share of the top 10 categories of high luxury cosmetics sales throughout the network. As communication diversifies, the meaning of lipstick has been given majorly by its users. Most of them are related to women. "Some feminists believe that wearing lipstick is liberating, embracing femininity and femininity... Other scholars have argued the opposite, that wearing lipstick is seen as a sign of women's self-objectification [2]." Advertising promotes the publicity and commercial of lipstick and expresses the underlying lipstick culture.

This paper examines the lipstick manufacturers' attitudes towards female consumers and the role of advertising in this process. To do so, we collect recent lipstick commercials in video form. And then, sort out the information conveyed by the images and texts in these advertisements and conduct a content analysis to distinguish whether they empower or dis-empower women. Our major argument is that, on the whole, all brands focus on the disempowerment of women, but there are a few advertisements that contain the elements of female empowerment.

Previous gender studies focus on the objectifying effects of formal institutions or taking effects through formal institutions. (e.g., the glass ceiling is effective through formal personal arrangements.) Less than adequate attention goes to informal discrimination by our society. Our research is to fill this step. By researching how advertisers dis-empower females through advertisements, we review such issues and further address such disempowerment against females.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The references in this article mainly involve the following aspects: research on women's disempowerment, expansion of Foucault's related theories, semiotic research, and feminist history research.

Most of the literature on female disempowerment in this study is about exploiting women in social norms, legal terms, or public opinion. Taking *Analysis of the Development of Women in Contemporary China* [3] by Xiaohui Liu and *Communal Control of Sex* [4] by Anping Zhou, they mostly reflect women's oppression and social status from a macro perspective mention the micropower mechanism like lipstick advertisements. While the related extension of Foucault's theory provides a new Angle for the study, such as *An Analysis of Foucault's Thought of Power* [5] by Heguo Xia. Although these scholars seldom take lipstick advertisement as an example when analyzing and demonstrating Foucault's

gaze and discipline theory, they provide a theoretical template for analyzing advertising symbols.

This study mainly uses the research method of semiotics papers. In *Symbolic Consumption under the Marketing Myth Illusion* [6] by Han Ding, *the Construction of Female Image in the Context of Consumerism* [7] by Fangzhang and Xiaoyue Shi and other semiotic-related papers, they all analyze the signifier or meaning through the commodity symbols, which provides the processing method of the codes and the logic to solving the problem in this paper.

The papers about feminist research also provide theoretical support. Represented by *Postmodern Feminist Thought* [8] by Yinghe Li, this part of the study provides the development of feminism. It provides methodological support for the judgment and classification of female empowerment codes in advertising analysis.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The research object of this paper is the lipstick advertisements in different colors from the top nine overseas luxury brands in China (Dior, NARS, MAC, Givenchy, CHANEL, Armani, YSL, Tom Ford, and Lancome). In the course of the study, the content of these lipsticks is segmented into three parts: the codes in the advertisements, the assignments of each code, and the sum of these assignments. These codes are mainly composed of lens language, model expression, product copy-writing, and conceptual design. And then, they are

assigned by checking the following aspects. Suppose these codes attempt to discipline the female audience or are filled with male gaze color and objectification of women. In that case, they are judge to be disempowerment of women, which are assigned to +1 or +2 by a specific degree of each code. On the other hand, if these brands dare to break the stereotype of women, pursue a liberal aesthetic, or have a feminist slogan, they are classified as women's empowerment, which are assigned to -1 or -2. After finishing the above steps, add up the assignments of each code under each brand. The final score shows the brand's attitude towards women. The higher the score this brand gets, the more obvious attitude towards women's disempowerment.

4. ANALYSIS

In Table 1, brand Dior is used to illustrate the origin of its final score. These four lipstick advertisements of different color numbers are divided into several codes. Some of them are disempowerment to women, such as the bare bodies, which convey the discipline of the male aesthetic on the female body and a sexually suggestive scene with the male gaze. Thus, depending on the degree, they are assigned to +1 and +2. While some of these codes are empowerment, such as the manicures on the hands, which show a woman's control over her body, and feminist copy-writing in advertising, which are also assigned to -1 and -2 with degrees. Then these assignments add up to the total score for each lipstick color of these brands.

Table 1. Code in Dior lipstick advertisement and its assignment

Brands	Color No.	Codes	Assignment	Final Score
Dior	New Rouge Dior Satin Balm	Bare hands and shoulders	+2	+12
		A fair-skinned model	+1	
		All makeup	+1	
	Diorific vernis 997 Dark Nights	Slight body nudity	+2	
		A fair-skinned model	+1	
		Manicures on the hands	-2	
		All makeup	+1	
	New Rouge Dior Forever Liquid	Slight sexual innuendo about the lips	+2	
		A fair-skinned model	+1	
		All makeup	+1	
		Feminist radio	-1	
	Rouge Dior 525	Moderate sexual innuendo from the boyfriend's perspective	+2	
A fair-skinned model		+1		

Table 2. The final score for each brand

Brand	Final Score
NARS	+10
MAC	+9
Givenchy	+4
CHANEL	+7
Armani	+14
YSL	+11
Tom Ford	+6
Lancome	+6

According to the summary of the above tables, the advertising symbols with the meaning of disempowerment (Assignment +) could be divided into three types.

4.1. Tools for Disciplining the Body

In almost all advertisements, lipstick becomes a tool of discipline. Some of them have been labeled with prescribed aesthetic criteria in advertising (Assignment+1), and some even show the body's aesthetic requirements to the audiences beyond the retouching ability of lipsticks itself (Assignment +2).

One of these prescribed labels is the defined connotation of one lipstick. In the process of propaganda, many lipsticks are associated with specific single female images. Just like positive red is regarded as the symbol of powerful women, and bean paste color represents gentleness and benevolence. Then these stereotypes become dressed up in flattering gimmicks. For example, YSL 12 was called the color which can capture the man. Men, the Propaganda party claims, prefer these soft and gentle-looking colors such as bean paste color and peach powder rather than those that seemed powerful and independent. At this point, lipsticks have become the tool of discipline. In Foucaultian theory, the ruler classifies, codes, and classifies individual behaviors to rule their behaviors [9]. By constantly correcting deviant behaviors and correcting deviant behaviors, the ruler can achieve the effect of discipline. In other words, the ruler, the arbiter of this set of aesthetic standards, the male coded and classified women by their preference for lipsticks. These colors began to take on a deeper meaning. Women who use the bean paste color are family-oriented, easy to handle, and easy to discipline, and women who use positive red are tough ones who may need more time to train. So with all this publicity, some women unknowingly reject personal preferences and conform to the male aesthetic. As a tool, lipsticks help the male more easily code and classify women and realize the discipline of female aesthetics.

But the most important prescribed label in advertisements is the “perfect.” It’s easy to see that the

appearance of lipstick must be accompanied by delicate makeup. Advertisers make models look their best in the right situation. On the contrary, models without makeup on camera, old women, dermatologists, and others with imperfect physical characteristics rarely appear in advertisements. The pursuit of beauty in lipstick advertising is far more than one lipstick can bring, which means consumers also need flawless skin, colorful eyeshadow, and perfect makeup. Thus, when they advertise the beautifying effects of lipsticks, the concept that beauty is perfection is also conveyed to the public. Based on this, lipstick has become an important micro mechanism for exerting power. As the perfect model in the video advertisement became a target for consumers to emulate, social discipline is internalized by the female group as the pursuit of a perfect self.

However, this kind of pursuit of “perfect” extends from the face to the body. It’s supposed to have nothing to do with the value of lipstick. While some advertisements have the camera of ample breasts, slender legs, S-shape curve, etc. Similarly, it’s hard to see obese women in advertisements, and “perfect body” also becomes the dominating definition of beauty. The Foucaultian theory would take the body as a symbol that can be manipulated, shaped, and tamed. Through lipstick advertising, the pursuit of physical perfection is passed on to its audiences and its customers. As lipstick is a beautifying product for women, the “perfect body” that appears in advertisements subtly influences their perceptions of beauty and compares them to shape their bodies and bring themselves into line with the doctrine by commercial advertising. It’s the discipline of female bodies.

4.2. The Medium of the Male Gaze

Although the customers of lipsticks are female, their aesthetic orientation is mainly to please men. Many lipstick advertisements are filled with the ubiquitous male gaze symbol (Assignment +1). What is more, in some ads, the entire video is reduced to a field of staring (Assignment +2).

If discipline is the embodiment of rights, the gaze is the source of rights. The stereotypes mentioned above of lip color, the discipline of the female body, and so on all fit the male gaze. These female roles in advertisements are put into particular fields. They are packaged into such images that fit the male aesthetic, such as an attractive woman, a tender girl, a vivacious maiden, and so on. These beauties stripped away from women's personalities and connotations and replaced them with symbols that conform to "femininity." In advertising video, the model becomes an aesthetic landscape composed of various male-gazing symbols. As Berger puts it: "The unequal relationship between the artists, viewers, and collectors, who are often men, and the subjects of the paintings, who are often women, is deeply rooted in the culture of attractiveness..... The observers of the women themselves are men, and the observers are women. So she turns herself into an object -- and a very specific visual object: the landscape [10]." This kind of landscape means that different women's connotations and characteristics are replaced by a single, symbolic stereotype represented by lipstick.

It seems that these gazing symbols are just being displayed in a video. They made no demands on the audience. Why did they end up being a discipline for all women? It's easy to see that the gazer, the men, pass on their value rules through the lens. Every female customer affected by these advertisements, everyone who is being gazed at, is inextricably drawn to these male judgments. So, in this case, the people who are being gazed at are not just models but also every woman. Like a magnifying glass, lipstick advertising videos filled with male gaze symbols serve as a medium to amplify the viewer's gaze. As far as the gaze goes, the web of discipline can all cover it.

What is more of a gaze than imposing male value judgments is the sexual innuendo in advertisements. In some advertisements, the whole video presents a kind of boyfriend perspective, that the viewer acts as the model's boyfriend. So many of the models' movements convey heterosexual sexual implications through the lens, especially biting lips and some other flirtatious expressions. In these kinds of advertisements, the expression of the male gaze is no longer just a few camera symbols or advertising slogans. The entire video becomes a field for surveillance. To use Foucault's theory, everyone behind the camera looking through a "boyfriend perspective" is the central tower of the prison, which was called "the eye of power" by Foucault, and the video is like a panoramic open-view prison with full-time dynamic surveillance of the body. In this prison, the models, the protagonists of such video will eventually be disciplined to a docile body.

4.3. Weapons of Female Competition and Self-objectification

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir regards women as objectified beings. In modern society, after a series of disciplines, women have been narrowed down to their characteristics [11]. The female image is gradually single and flat, making women gradually towards the property of "beings," away from the particularity of "people." This is the objectification of women in a patriarchal society. But it's worth noticing that some lipstick advertisements tend to self-objectify women (Assignment +2).

Though modern women consider lipstick as a tool of self-beautification, the choice and use of lipstick are competitive to a certain extent. WHOO, a well-known Korean beauty brand, slogan, "Be a beauty, be the center." In such propaganda, lipstick becomes a competitive tool that helps women improve their charm and compete for the spotlight. This is not an isolated case. It's very common that on the Internet, the gimmick of some dark-color lipsticks is the one which suits quarreling with mistresses, and sometimes positive red was nicknamed "the color for the lawful wife."

This has to do with the concept of female competition, which is a kind of competition between women for the attention of men or the right to mate. Foucault thinks that While being the object of "gazing," the observed experience the power and pressure brought by the gazer's eyes and materialize themselves by internalizing the viewer's value judgment. As mentioned before, the male is the gazer, and the female is the object being gazed at. To please men, some women choose to reduce themselves to appendages. They are like commodities available for selection, which can only increase their value as objects by constantly expanding their capital of being gazed at. So these women have to rely on female internal competition to show their worth. And the lipstick is a weapon in their competition. They compete for the "winner" by choosing the most outstanding lipstick and pair it with sophisticated makeup, making themselves the most valuable item on the shelf. Nerveless, female competition is supposed to be a self-choice. The improper publicity in the advertisement caused the use of lipstick to be misinterpreted. Many female consumers are even starting to take pride in female competition. They are seduced into the trap of self-objectification. And in this process of female self-objectification, lipstick, as a medium of the male gaze, becomes the weight of female self-worth. While this value objects, the female is more objective.

Even though all brands' ads tend to disempower women, from Table 1, we can see that some of the advertising codes have the color of female empowerment (Assignment -).

4.4. The Awareness of Different Background of Models

Though the disempowerment criticizes fashion industries exploit their customers by feminist slogans, they have progress pushes equality. There is an increasing awareness towards different backgrounds of models, such as age, skin tone, and gender. The databases we use strongly suggest this change. Almost every brand uses models with various skin tones. Some even contain various skin tones, not just limited white, black, and Asian models. For instance, most of the TF lipstick advertisement often uses three models in one shot to compare their top-selling lipstick. As for other brands also have a range of models, but they're either advertised for a specific one or only have one specific skin tone. It assists in producing various aesthetic perspectives surrounding different skin tones, which is hard to achieve. Because people find it hard to understand or agree with each other, this provides a great opportunity to show the beauty of ethnic minority and gain a good sale and reputation. This further makes progress by creating more job opportunities for different groups of models. Rather than invisible workplace discrimination, they have fairer working conditions. According to this data, there have been twenty-four percent of Black and Hispanic employees reported experiencing discrimination at work in the past 12 months, as have been 15% of White employees and 16% of Asian employees. And 75% of Black employees say that discrimination was related to their race or ethnicity, compared with 61% of Hispanic and 42% White workers. Women often are the hardest 'disaster area' of workplace discrimination, especially with black, colored, and Asian women and those with ethnic minority backgrounds. Not only do they face the risk of sexual harassment, but the system also bullies them. As they enrolled in modeling, it provides more flexibility towards their work. Also, they can be employed by different firms during a period. They don't need to worry about pregnancy leave cause dismiss because there are always designers who seek ideas on models. There's definitely some discrimination. At least it provides them a freer choice. After shooting the advertisement, they can leave. For normal employees, they have to wait until their contract is overdue. Otherwise, they face the risk of being unemployed, at least for some time.

4.5. Different Attitudes Towards Various Color Group

Interestingly enough, the language of advertisements on different types of lipstick has a bizarre diversity. Darker shades and nude balm usually advertise in the feminism slogan. For instance, the recent Chanel Rouge Coco Bloom advertisement, uses 'A new shine is born' to emphasize their new product. Most of the shades Chanel advertise in the range were darker, such as brick red or

bright orange. There is criticism that the beauty industry separates different colors by the various slogan. Pinky shades often have more sexual suggestions. And these exploits women. However, most of the data collected from Instagram shows a different conclusion. The largest number of advertisements beauty brands implement is red, a darker, more independent shade. They aware of the problem. Rather than putting docile shades into the market, they explore more individuality of women. Although there is suspicion that the fashion industry utilizes its product to attract female consumers, it still progressed, empowering women to be better of themselves. Makeup products hide imperfections on human faces. Especially with lipsticks, without full makeup, women felt more confident because they look more attractive. Moreover, surprisingly, with a growing acceptance of cosmetic products in daily life, men's attitudes change.

During the 17th-18th century, the word 'slut' means women who could not cook well. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the definition is 'a woman who is usually untidy and lazy.' This definition is rare to use nowadays in modern society. Thus back in time, it is not completely pejorative, even with a humorous sense. However, from this focus change, we can observe freer sexual ideas from women. Men no longer attack females about their laziness rather the openness of sexual behavior from women. The reason behind this is because man discovers that women's increasing awareness of sexual position has elevated their status in sex. In other words, women gain more control during their sex. And that makes them extremely uncomfortable. They felt that their dominant position has threatened by the empowerment of sex. Thus, they attack more sexual lives of women, a quite private side of people, which makes them superior.

Sex is usually considered an act leading by a man. Most of the romantic novel and porn is leading by man. They started the sex first. And women who lead it will be considered as 'experienced,' otherwise, there is no explanation for their behavior. Usually, people learn how to have sex through those productions. However, much of the porn was designed especially to satisfy male's sexual desires. To achieve this, many of the moves are violent and wild, which women could not benefit from. To some extent, the awakening of sexual consciousness for the woman is significant. It empowers women with the confidence to lead when they have sex and explores ways to spread their sex charisma. And cosmetic products definitely help women realize this. As described prior, the use of red lipstick marked thick lips. Mascara highlights charming eyes, and foundations create smooth skin. These contributions make a woman more glamorous. Moreover, they can change their lip color whatever they like, from nudes to pinky color, darker or brighter lips, purple or orange if they want to. Those different shades

that the fashion industry produces largely to satisfy their needs to seek themselves. Every shade they have put on suggests a newfound and unknown side of themselves.

4.6. Rise of Feminism and Fashion Industry

On the bright side, the development of cosmetic products is closely linked with the rise of feminism. Throughout history, fashion idea is a latent factor that evokes feminism. It didn't gain any benefits legislatively. But it frees women spiritually, which is the second opportunity to explore themselves. One of the examples comes from America in the 1920s. This period is also known as the Jazz Age. Under the economic prosperity, many theaters and dance halls were set up. Also frees woman from home chores, allows them to have more spare time to focus on other things. Young women who often party are called 'flappers,' they dress bravely and embraces a lifestyle viewed by many at the time as outrageous, immoral, or downright dangerous. The unique fashion style they accepted that use cosmetic to achieve the look of dark eyes, red lips, red nail polish, blush, mascara, and sun tan. It was also a time much famous fashion industry prospers, such as Chanel, ruled flapper's fashion. Her innovative new style of clothes established her own perfume brand. The very first perfume released to become a global hit, later known as No.5 Chanel. Also, create an oligopoly firm dedicated to cosmetics. That boost the economy of the US, the increased demand for cosmetic products, and more options of clothes lead to further development of It was considered the first generation of independent American women. Not only flappers pushed barriers in economic, but they also evoke political and sexual freedom for women. Though it may have suspicions that the fashion industry wants to attract female consumers with 'perfect advertise' and 'male gaze'. The fashion industry explores the beauty of women's bodies. It raises awareness on the subject of what the standard of beauty is. Red lipsticks, short skirts, and brown or black stockings are all representations of what they viewed as beauty at the time. Further, with the emergence of those new markets, capital allocated resources could make further profits. To compete for a wider and sustained consumer group, safer products arise among competitions. It creates a safer and healthier environment for females like 'flappers to seek beauty. At least they do not need to have belladonna surgery to widen their eye size.

Atropa belladonna, also more modernly called atropine, is a natural analgesic. Only one part of atropine per 130,000 parts of water is enough to dilate the pupils. That is how strong it is. One drop per eye would block receptors in the muscles of the eye that constrict pupil size. As one might suspect, this comes at an immediate cost to vision, resulting in blurriness and the inability to focus on close objects. This would wear off over time, but prolonged use of belladonna could cause permanent

vision distortion or blindness. It is valuable to argue that cosmetic creates a safer condition for women who seeks beauty. Otherwise, many of them will die for their standard of beauty.

They are now with new cosmetic products such as eye-shadow and mascara. The fashion industry, as a profiteering industry, wants to maximize profit indeed. But it has made a significant contribution to the beauty and sexual openness of the world, which is also a major purpose of feminism. That is the awakening of sexual consciousness and the realization that sex is a self-choice.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the above research, we can see that all the brands selected this time have reflected women's disempowerment in their lipstick advertisements, but some of them have elements of female empowerment.

In *Madness and Civilization* by Foucault, he puts forward two governing modes of power: leprosy schema in ancient monarchy society and plague schema in modern society. Different from the former, It's a discipline that removes the venom of violence and replaces it with nonviolence. But it's all about controlling people and turning them into tame people who conform to the moral standards and values of society. By analyzing the codes of lipstick advertisements, it can be found that lipstick is an important tool and medium in the discipline of "plague schema". Male value judgment and male aesthetic pleasure reach every female audience by advertising, which makes women self-censoring and self-objectifying to have become the image of models in advertising. This so as to achieve the aim of the discipline.

But it is worth mentioning that the voice of women's rights is also exerting some influence on these advertisements. Whether it is the awakening of female body consciousness or the self-choice of a variety of colors, the rise of feminism is having a real impact on the fashion industry. Because of that, the meaning of lipstick for female consumers is gradually moving away from the male-dominated tool. The use of lipsticks has become a way to help women beautify themselves and be confident, and this kind of beautification means that women are free from objectification, gaze, and discipline, which is a completely self and free personal expression.

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