



An Analysis of Stereotypes in Television Advertising——Take “Household Appliances” and “Women” as Examples

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Abstract. Stereotypes refer to fixed impressions of a certain type of person, which associate with characteristics and behaviors, while gender stereotypes indicate social qualities that people have different expectations for males and females, including how they deal with matters, their personality characteristics, behavior patterns and psychological acceptance. From the West in the last century to the present, stereotypes and even sexism have continued to emerge in the advertisements of household appliances, and the views on household appliances conveyed in the advertisements remain to be considered. Although the issue is responded to by elements of society, its negative impacts cannot be underestimated. Starting from stereotypes, this article aims to analyze social stereotypes between women and household appliances based on some advertising cases, discussing relevant restrictive policies that have been introduced to mitigate the negative effects of stereotypes.

Keywords: Advertising; Stereotypes; Gender Equality; Household Appliances

1 Introduction

In 2016, an advertising poster put up in a London Underground station by Protein World, a UK-based company selling weight-loss products caused heated discussion among people (Figure 1). In the poster, a skinny beauty in a bikini is in the main position, with a slender figure and two blurred eyes. A conspicuous sentence is behind the beauty, “ARE YOU BEACH BODY READY?”



Fig. 1. Weight-loss Advertisements on London Underground

Experts from various sectors have expressed their opinions. Feminists regard this advertisement as body-shaming for average women, treating women as sexual symbols. Health professionals consider it not only misleading but also dangerous as the advertisement claims the weight-loss milkshake can be a substitute for three meals a day and help women obtain a perfect stature. Experts who study juvenile problems have criticized such advertising of unrealistic and unreal perfect images like “bikini bodies” may bring wrong recognition to adolescents and add too much psychological pressure to young women. There have been countless similar incidents. For instance, an advertisement for baby milk powder was thought to imply product-grabbing, which limited the future development of baby boys and girls by showing that those baby girls grow up to become ballet dancers while baby boys become mathematicians. Such advertisements that imply gender stereotypes or even discrimination repress multicultural aesthetics and are still emerging in every country. In fact, such advertising “tradition” has a long history. This article will start with the definition of stereotype, analyze the stereotypes in several advertisements from the East and the West with a case-based approach, and finally discuss the status and development trend of advertising.

2 A Trace to Stereotype

“Stereo” is derived from the ancient Greek “στερεός”. It comes from the root word “stere” which means solid and later extended to “three-dimensional things”. The compound word “stereotype” was a term in the printing industry, referring to “stereotype printing, making lead tablets”. The term “stereotype” was first proposed by Lippman in his book *Public Opinion* in 1922. It refers to a fixed impression of a cer-

tain type of person formed by social classification according to gender, race, age, or occupation, which is usually associated with certain characteristics and behaviors [1]. Since then, disciplines such as sociology, journalism, communication studies, political science and psychology have all drawn on this concept from Lippman. According to the Dictionary of Sociology, “stereotype” means “an inaccurate and simplistic view of a social group that leads others to view it fixedly”. Then “gender stereotype” derived from the concept “stereotype” refers to the social qualities that people have different expectations for males and females, including their attitudes toward things, their personal characteristics and social behavior patterns.

Gender stereotype is closely related to the inherited division of labor between men and women, which already existed in a primitive society in Marx’s opinion [2]. The original division of labor between men and women was based on the purpose of bearing children. Due to the social background of the natural economy and the biological differences between men and women, women were mainly responsible for the reproduction of the labor force with their reproductive function, while men were responsible for the reproduction of materials. In the classical period, scientists believed that the limb muscles of men were stronger than that of women, and brain activity is higher in men than women, while women were more patient, being more suitable for raising children at home. In the post-industrial period, men became bourgeois who worked in the workforce and whose work was paid to obtain political and legal privileges, with women becoming veritable proletarians in charge of household affairs. Most social phenomena indicate that women are still responsible for taking care of children and cleaning houses, and they are the only ones who consume and use household appliances. Males and females not only differ in their biological sex but also in their social gender.

Advertising, as a communication tool with the masses, has fast transmission speeds and far-reaching influence, making it the major means of business promotion. Stereotypes in advertisements become a particularly serious issue that has a subtle impact on people’s thinking and cognition through repeated and secret communication in daily life, making people deeply immersed in gender stereotypes without knowing them. This is most prominent in advertisements for household appliances.

3 Stereotypes of Women in Advertising

There is a wide range of household appliances with numerous brands in the market, but with careful observation can people find out their advertising forms follow the same pattern. Judging from the identities in the advertisements, the washing machines, laundry detergents and kitchen utensils are often tied to women. These women are housewives, virtuous wives and devoted mothers, and “superwomen” on the kitchen battlefield. On the one hand, the advertisement portrays the ideal use of the household appliances, such as neatly arranged cutlery, a spotless kitchen, and delicious meals. On the other hand, it shapes the ideal user, an elegantly dressed but professional host waiting for her husband to come home. It seems that if you buy the items in the advertisement, you can enjoy a comfortable life without doing anything.

Even if other identities may occasionally appear in the advertisements, it is still difficult for women to get rid of the arrangement from designers behind them [3]. In an advertisement promoting automatic cars in the 1960s, a female driver appeared in the image, but with wide-open eyes, compressed lips, and tightened hands gripping the steering wheel, showing a sense of sincerity and fear (Figure 2). It is written, “The Mini Automatic. For simple driving” in the advertisement. In similar auto-advertisements, women are portrayed as “half-witted girls” with low IQ, being cautious and ignorant of machinery. Today, “female drivers” has become synonymous with demeaning females who drive cars. Besides limiting female identity, advertising also limits the development and value of women. On a vitamin advertisement poster from the West in the 1930s (Figure 3), it was written “SO THE HARDER A WIFE WORKS, THE CUTER SHE LOOKS”, linking the value of women with housework.



Fig. 2. The Automatic Car Advertisement in the 1960s.



Fig. 3. The Vitamin Advertisement in the 1930s.

Stereotype advertisements from the last century are still common today. The author conducts research and analysis on the advertisement of Liby, one of the four major giants selling daily chemical products. Liby was founded in 1994, and by the end of 2021, the annual sales of Liby Corporation reach 18 billion yuan, establishing more than 30 branches across China. Household and care products are the core of Liby and the sales of its cleaning products rank first in the country. But looking at the advertisements for Liby's detergent over the years, the implied gender stereotype still exists (Figure 4). The advertisements often show a naughty little boy playing with a pet dog and kicking a ball on the grass, getting muddy all over. Currently, the mother always regards the laundry detergent as a savior. After pouring a few drops into the clean water, the stained shirt will become as white as new ones after slightly shaking in the water a few times. The mother then will be admired and envied by the neighbor mothers.



Fig. 4. The Advertisement for Liby Detergent

Describing the representation of women in TV advertisements, Jane Root once said, “Women are always presented as silly and ecstatic over some simple products as if a new brand of a vacuum cleaner or a deodorant could make a difference in her life”.

This evaluation still applies today. Although it describes the western situation in the last century, and we are now living in the 21st century in the East, the situations still present a coincidental collision of time and space. Today, these advertisements not only define women’s roles in society and families but also limit their values. They express how women are born and what they should be, hindering the free development of women. And the ubiquitous media publicity such as poster advertisements and TV promotions has subtly affected people’s cognition, leading us to hold gender stereotypes without knowing it.

4 Stereotypes of Household Appliances in Advertising

A variety of products cannot be ignored in advertisements for household appliances. On careful consideration, we also have many stereotypes about household appliances. It is generally believed in society that the invention of household appliances undoubtedly liberated women and was a “mythical” existence at that time. Even now in the 21st century, many people are still convinced of this adjective. We can have a smattering of this admiration for household appliances from the advertising slogans.

In 1955, an advertisement for BENDIX washing machines was launched, and the slogan was attractive enough to catch people’s attention, “BENDIX soaks, washes, rinses three times, damp dries, drains itself and switches off all by itself! You can automatically leave it to BENDIX. Every week there are more than half a million British housewives who use it at home or in laundries.” The slogan shows that the advent of household appliances like washing machines liberated women from the laundry or kitchen, enabling them to do whatever they want to do. Relevant literature

materials have also proved the labor that used to take hours (tough labor) can now be completed in minutes with ease [4].

However, the data at that time showed that household appliances did not really liberate women.

In 1950, a survey of full-time housewives found that they spent an average of 70 hours a week on housework, while another survey in 1970 showed that the average time became 77 hours. The use of a washing machine saves the time of hand washing and improves the working environment of clothes washing as women do not need to soak and scrub by hand. But it also means that the frequency of washing clothes for women is increased, and the quality of their laundry work is required to improve. The popularity of household fridges saves time for shopping at the market and reduces the number of trips to the supermarket. But it also indicates that the wife needs to provide food for the family at any time, even if the supermarket or store is closed because the necessary raw materials are already in the fridge. From this perspective, the common use of household appliances increases the workload of women, which is a “pretense” to liberate women. This is not to criticize the invention of household appliances without doubt, but we should face up to the purpose of their use, and avoiding them from becoming the “second repression” for families.

5 Advertising Restrictions and Their Impacts

The advertisement for weight-loss products mentioned in the introduction caused outrage among many locals after it was posted in a London underground station. “Are fat people not qualified to go to the beach?”. “I am ready for a long time, the only thing I have to prepare is my swimsuit”. Many netizens questioned the advertisement online while some people resisted offline with practical actions. They wore bikinis and confidently showed their less sexy bodies than the advertising models. Nearly 70,000 people protested and demanded that the advertisement be removed. Some time ago, a borrowing company launched an advertisement of an old man and a flight attendance, indicating a poor old man is coupled with a fair-skinned, beautiful, and rich flight attendance because he applied for a borrowing. Regardless of the appearance, age and regional differences, the advertisement has even exaggerated female occupational discrimination to the extreme, so it has been boycotted by many netizens after it was broadcast.

British authorities have also reacted to the situation. The Advertising Standards Authority (United Kingdom) (ASA) announced on its website that content depicting gender stereotypes will be removed from UK advertisements starting in 2018. New advertisements should not include contents where gender traits correlate with success in the social sphere or portray typical personalities for both men and women, such as depicting men should be brave while women should be gentle, or mocking men for not being good at typical “feminine” tasks and so on. As these contents have been firmly believed may be potentially harmful to certain groups, misleading the audience and having negative impacts on individuals, the economy and society. In short, we found that some descriptions in advertisements can limit people’s potential over time.

The ASA's advertising rules apply to both the broadcast and non-broadcast media, including television, radio, newspapers, and social media.

While fighting against gender stereotypes may seem like the right thing to do, the definition of offending content is still difficult to make. Bad control of boundaries may still have irreversible effects. On the one hand, restrictions on gender stereotypes have been extreme in some departments from the advertising industry to the public transport system. For example, Transport for London has issued new regulations that prohibit the use of "ladies and gentlemen" greeting passengers on the metro. Instead, a gender-neutral greeting such as "Good morning, everyone" is used. Gender equality is not just a slogan that stays at the level of oral restraint, but it should be rooted in people's hearts. Transport for London pays excessive attention to the seemingly little-noticed greeting as it is worried that it would be complained about by the public for slipping on gender stereotype. Therefore, such restrictions may inevitably lead to the over-correct of some advertising companies to avoid "falling into the pitfall", or even avoid starting in order not to make mistakes, causing the stagnation of the advertising industry. On the other hand, businesses have noticed that advertisements that reject gender stereotypes can often win favorable impressions from people. Thus, "feminism" may become a new marketing strategy, providing a "sugar coating" for capital. The combination of feminism and advertising has extended a new advertising strategy, Femvertising, selling products by positively promoting the power of women [5]. Behind the gender equality and feminism promoted in the advertisements, there are still hidden "trademarks" in consumer society.

6 Conclusions

In the beginning, I was hesitant to include the stereotypes of household appliances in the article, thinking there would be a deviation from the theme. Later, two aspects were considered. On the one hand, most people believe that household appliances save time and effort, which can improve their lives. But their appearance and entry into the families also present negative effects and deeper implications, where there is true "stereotype" of household appliances. On the other hand, the household appliances promoted in the advertisements do not liberate women but instead, increase their workload. Today, the slogan of feminism is held high. Women want to have their world outside their families, but they still need to provide more efficient and high-quality services for their families, which would be double oppression for them to a certain extent. As the main theme is "stereotype", this article focuses more on the negative parts of household appliances and advertisements. In fact, the invention of household appliances has many subversive meanings that have not been discussed in the article, with only a few critical views mentioned at the end of the fourth part.

Males and females are not only different in physical sex, but also in social gender. These differences originate from the division of labor based on primitive society and natural conditions, which have evolved into the division of labor and skills in historical development. And gender stereotype has also formed during this stage. Being a communication tool with the mass audience, with fast transmission speed and

far-reaching influence, advertising plays a significant role in publicity. However, from the West in the last century to the current world, gender stereotypes and even female discrimination continue to emerge in advertising, especially in advertisements for household appliances. Although all sections of society have taken certain measures, the negative impacts cannot be ignored. To achieve gender equality in advertising, we still have a long way to go.

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