



Case studies on Female Empowerment Advertising from Post-feminist Perspective

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Abstract. In the post feminist society, advertising has evolved into a new form, that is, women's empowerment advertising. Women's empowerment advertisements pay more attention to women's feelings, and convey women's self realization, self acceptance and self empowerment to the society at the same time. To a certain extent, such advertisements promote the development of feminism. Based on the post feminist perspective, through the critical analysis of two advertising cases, this paper examines the empowerment of women reflected in two typical advertisements. These two cases are Nike's Boundless Girls program, and PROYA's program which proposes gender is not the borderline, prejudice is. It concludes that women's empowerment advertisements do reflect women's consciousness and can contribute to China's women's movement, but they inevitably intend to sell their products. Once the simple act of purchasing products is regarded as gaining power, the concept of women's empowerment will be generalized, and the real needs of women will be covered up. Although the cases discussed in this paper are still relatively limited, it will still provide some enlightenment for the study of consumer culture from the perspective of post feminism.

Keywords: Female empowerment, Advertisement, Post-feminist.

1 Introduction

Under the influence of post-feminism, increasingly more international corporations are joining the wave of women's empowerment, which gave rise to women's empowerment advertising. Unlike the male perspective of women in the past, women's empowerment advertising focuses on women's own feelings. The public no longer pursues perfect women, but welcomes diverse images of women. The core of this type of advertising is not the advertisement itself, but the self-fulfilment, self-acceptance and self-empowerment of women conveyed through the advertising.

Female empowerment, as a new advertising concept, continues to drive the feminist movement by instilling a sense of femininity in advertising. The origin of post-feminism, usually considered as a product of the second wave of the women's move-

ment, can be traced back to the 1960s. By synthesising post-feminism with the three waves of feminism theories, Huang argued that the younger generation should not adhere to the old feminist political claims, but should enjoy life on the basis of respecting differences [1]. She discussed the distinction between post-feminism and traditional feminism from the perspective of feminism evolution, and advocated the development of feminism pluralism to constitute the new pattern of pluralistic coexistence of feminism theories [1]. Due to the inherent pluralistic qualities of post-feminism, Zeng claimed that post-feminism, as a theoretical strategy, intertwined the contradictory theoretical systems of advancement and degradation, construction and critique, resistance and redemption, depoliticisation and micro politicisation and popularity and scholarship in its development [2]. Cui pointed out in his article that post-feminism was not the end of feminism, but a transformation of it, which was not as radical as earlier feminism, but was interdisciplinary and politically moderate [3]. It promoted women's social status by popularising female gender consciousness through education. As a result, the status of women in advertising has changed to a certain degree as women have become increasingly aware of their ideas. According to Wang, women's identity had been redefined and improved under the influence of post-feminism [4]. The original images of women in advertisements were no longer those under men's scrutiny. Women began to go beyond their families and became active in various fields, while males participated in the family. Changes of gender power were added to advertisements [4]. Therefore, female empowerment advertising is a product of the post-feminist era.

In addition, Becker-Herby argued that the advertising messages and corporate values promoted by women's empowerment advertising needed to be in line with social values. She further suggested several characteristics of women's empowerment advertising [5]. Abitbol and Sternadori examined the impact of women's empowerment advertising from corporations with positive images on consumers' willingness to consume. By interviewing three focus groups, they investigated women's and men's perceptions and evaluations of the phenomenon and found that participants tended to hold contradictory views, namely suspecting a commercial intent while supporting the promotion of women's status [6]. The men's group thought that future research on women's empowerment advertising should not be limited to examining women themselves. Among the domestic studies, Wang studied typical cases of women's empowerment advertising, argued that its impact was limited in countries with strong traditional attitudes and raised the question of how women could achieve self-empowerment in the absence of consumer power [4]. Li suggested that advertising ultimately persuaded consumers to purchase by influencing public aesthetics and that women needed to break away from advertising culture to seek personal development in society [7]. By researching and comparing 12 case studies of global advertising, Dong put forward that women's empowerment advertising could not promote the protection and empowerment of women's rights on its own [8]. Integrating the UN Sustainable Development Goals, he called for a joint effort of all walks of life to help realise women's rights.

Although there have been relevant theoretical studies on female empowerment advertising, it is still not in the mainstream. Nowadays, we are entering a post-feminist

era where more studies are needed. Therefore, this paper intends to reflect on the ambivalence and complexity of modern women's empowerment consciousness through a critical analysis of two cases of women's empowerment advertising from a post-feminist perspective.

2 Case descriptions of female empowerment advertising

In the post-feminist period, female empowerment advertising can be seen everywhere. As major companies compete for the women's market every Women's Day by launching women's empowerment advertisements, the paper chooses two successful and representative cases in recent years and analyse them.

2.1 Nike's Boundless Girls program

Nike launched the Boundless Girls program in 2019 with a promotional video to encourage more women to join the movement [9]. Incorporating the Women and Children Research Centre at Peking University and Maple Data, Nike surveyed more than 2,000 girls aged 9 to 14. According to the data, more than half of the girls love PE lessons and physical activities, but rarely exercise in their spare time. Girls are less active in sports and are more likely to drop out of sports than boys, and there is an established societal bias against female power. The short film asks the question from the girls' first perspective: What kind of girl should I be? The camera then switches between several girls, who speak rhetorically about the prejudices against them, and then makes the point "don't let anyone tell you how to be a girl" [10], followed by images of these girls skateboarding, playing basketball, running, dancing, etc. with confidence. Finally, it shows that the aim of the Boundless Girls project is to design exclusive sports lessons for girls to help them break down traditional prejudices and enjoy the joy of sports.

In 2022, the second phase of the "Boundless Girls" project was launched with the "Born Ready" athlete round table. Nike invited four outstanding female athletes, namely women footballers Wang Shanshan and Wu Haiyan, who recently regained their Asian titles, tennis star player Li Na and swimmer Liu Xiang. During the round table event, the four outstanding female athletes talked about the importance of role models and how it was extremely important for girls to have a role model they could reach out to. They also shared the great changes and benefits they have had from sports.

2.2 PROYA's "Gender is not the borderline, prejudice is" program

Unlike marketing campaigns that emphasise the power of women alone, PROYA has balanced the issue of gender dichotomy in its imagery dedicated to eliminating gender differences.

In 2022, PROYA continued its core insight of "Gender is not the borderline, prejudice is" on the 8th March last year and continued to focus on the theme of "Gender

Equality" by releasing a short film *Lion Girl*. The film is voiced by a woman football player Wang Shou and is based on the true story of the Guangzhou Lionesses. In the short video, Wang Shuang takes on the role of a narrator, telling the story of the "lionesses" who overcame worldly prejudices and hard training. The Lions tumbled and jumped in the sunrise and dusk, telling the world with their sweat and tears: "History is not history, there is also her story. If there is no one to write it, then let us write it ourselves. Don't let anyone stop us, including ourselves, even if it's us." In the end, the women's lion dance team won the gold medal and was the best drumming group in the competition, and was expected to participate in the higher level of the competition as the representative team of Guangzhou. With their perseverance and actions, they have made the whole community aware that strength, sweat and lions also belong to women. In this TVC, both the narrator, Shuang Wang, and the protagonists, the "Lion Girls Team", show their female strength in their chosen fields, and PROYA has chosen to use their stories to tell all women that those seemingly insurmountable gender prejudices are not a barrier to women, but are just paper tigers that cannot stop them from becoming lions. On the day of the event, the topic buzzed over 120 million, and PROYA's brand exposure and word-of-mouth grew, making it the Top 5 in the beauty industry on T-mall, the Top 1 in Chinese beauty on T-mall, and the Top 1 in Chinese skincare on JD [11].

3 Critical analysis on female empowerment advertising cases

The above two advertisements are the exploration of female empowerment advertising by medium-sized corporations in the post-feminist era. The digital media era has created favorable conditions for the dissemination of feminism, and the status of women has been improved to a certain extent compared with the past [12]. As women's empowerment advertising continues to enter the public, women's empowerment awareness is also increasing. However, displaying women's power through advertising is purely for profit's sake. Enterprises attach feminist labels to their products and advocate that female consumers can acquire self-empowerment through purchase, which tends to make female consumers have the wrong idea that female power can be acquired through consumption [13]. In fact, the goods themselves do not shape the so-called femininity.

3.1 Female empowerment advertising reflects female consciousness

The "Boundless Girls" short video shows how girls can be themselves regardless of others' opinions. Social discipline is cleverly implanted from a first-person perspective. Back to the inner heart of the girls, through self-reflection and reconstruction, they transcend social and cultural barriers, break the rules and prejudices, become confident and brave, and reflect the strong female subject consciousness of the brand [14]. Girls can have all kinds of images that are not defined by tradition, which coincides with the reconstruction of female discourse power reflected in post-feminism.

The voices of female athletes help girls to realise their inner potential, empower women through sports and build and develop the future of sports for them. As the "others" in social discourses, women can realise self-liberation only by realising the subjectivity and transcendence of female personality [15]. The "Boundless Girls" project gives women more rights to speak and, to some extent, influences the social perception of women's images through advertising, thus empowering women's social status. In the public discussion, centering on the specific gender of "men and women", PROYA cannot be ignored when viewing the social gender concept, and goes out of gender to return the frame of men and women to human beings, abandons the traditional concept, advocates women's desire and survival for themselves, and strengthens the concept of female empowerment.

3.2 Women empowerment advertising is essentially "selling products"

Through advertisements, women's empowerment advertising keeps the discussion on women's issues fermenting on social platforms, providing an open and transparent discourse space for women and more channels for women to express their opinions and seek equal rights.

For one thing, these advertising works echo the development of feminist movement, for another, promote the further development of feminist thoughts. However, we cannot ignore the problems in advertising production practice. While Nike and PROYA's support of women's rights is a sign of progress, it is part of a new marketing strategy that still connects brands with consumers and essentially sells products through "female empowerment". While advertising models evolve, the principle remains the same: When you buy something, you are supporting and living up to a noble idea. The underlying idea it is conveying is that in this age of ideas and opinions, if you have an idea, you can live a good life. Such conceptual advertising is certainly a more cost-effective strategy than spending a lot of money on celebrities.

3.3 Women's empowerment advertising makes "empowerment" more generalised

Women's empowerment advertising aims to make women feel "empowered" when buying products. As long as they pay for a product, they can be given the concept of feminism. The slightest accusation is labeled anti-feminist and anti-social progressive. Female empowerment has become a selling point in advertising. As a kind of female power, female empowerment is gradually losing its power over women compared with the past and is becoming an empty word. Feminism is diluted and exploited. Empowerment in a broad sense makes women seem to feel empowered in everything they do. The empowerment of women, coupled with consumerism, has made shopping seems like a means for women to maintain their autonomy in a male-dominated society. In fact, women who can afford to buy women's empowerment products do not need to be empowered in this way. Empowerment advertising targets economically independent women in urban areas, while marginalised women who really need empowerment are ignored. Today's society is still unequal between men and women

and has an unequal distribution of power. Under the influence of consumerism, products in the guise of "female empowerment" entered the market and gained a good reputation. However, the real needs of women have not been paid attention to, and the status quo of women in a vulnerable position is difficult to change. Only by being self-aware, independent of outside influences, knowing and believing in who they are and being true to themselves can women truly be powerful and own half the sky.

4 Conclusion

This paper mainly interprets and analyzes the social significance of women's empowerment advertising through case studies. In recent years, as urban women's education levels and consuming power have increased, our society is experiencing a new female awakening, and news coverage of women has changed a lot. Under the impact of post-feminist ideas, women play a role of embellishment and buffer in the pursuit of personal freedom and obedience. Female empowerment advertising provides mainstream media with an alternative cultural resource to use, a safe public dialogue space for contemporary women to explore their own path to gentle and harmless self-empowerment. Using the identity of a "businesswoman" as a cultural cloak, these commercials try to persuade women to internalise the constraints society places on them. Different levels of consumption are embedded in different levels of consumption indoctrination, with most advertisements showing that only confident, financially capable urban women are qualified to gain power from female empowerment advertising products. Thus, while these groundbreaking feminist advertisements are seen as a benchmark for the women's movement in our country, we must look at its complexity from multiple perspectives. Although we admit that post-feminism has a lot of discussions on traditional concepts, gender discrimination and other women's issues, it cannot be ignored that with the deepening of women's rights, social needs are reduced to the self-pursuit of young women, and eventually become the background of consumer culture.

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