

Discussion on Automobiles and Automotive Advertising from the Perspective of Semiotics

Illustrated by the Case of Date My Car

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Abstract—Date My Car is an online program which is sponsored by iQIYI in 2012. It aims at letting people make friends through the media of cars. Women from 20 to 35 years old as well as men over 20 years old with their cars are all qualified for participation. In the program, the female guests may infer the male guests' characters and interests through their cars' brands, price, appearance as well as the cars' internal decorations. Through this method, the female ones may find their Mr. Rights. In this case, car, which is only a plain vehicle, is put on the position where it can show a person's inner world. Its brand, price, color, style and targeting consumers, even the decoration and small objects in it, all become the most essential aspects concerning the owner's taste and his appearance. This article analyzes such phenomenon based on the Semeiotics raised by Roland Barthes and the theory of symbol consumption put forwarded by Jean Baudrillard. Besides, it analyses some feasible methods to make the automotive advertising more attractive in the above mentioned program with theories of Semeiotics and ideological advertisements.

Keywords—*Semeiotics; symbol consumption; car; Date My Car; ideological advertisements; signifier; signified*

I. THE CAR FORMS A PERSON'S EXTRINSIC IMAGE

Every person has his or her own extrinsic features including the bodily features like height, face, hair style and so on. Meanwhile, the extrinsic features of a person also involve the dressing style, decoration as well as the to-carry-goods etc. One's image is essential for self-expression because the information it passes forms the first impression he/she leaves on others in interpersonal communications. Each extrinsic feature like dress and hair style has its special meaning. Telephones and cars are all the more so. For a person living in an era where style and individuality are valued, showing his or her distinctive style as well as personality with the extrinsic features has become quite fashionable.

Nowadays, with the population of automobiles, the car has become an important element constituting a person's extrinsic image. When girls judge a man, they will, in many cases, take "car possession" as a reference of his qualification for being a husband. Moreover, the price, color, model, brand as well as its decorations are all for their consideration.

II. AUTOMOBILES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PHILIP KOTLER'S THEORY OF "STAGE OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR"

The famous marketer Philip Kotler divided all the consuming behaviors into three basic stages. Stage one is the consumption of quantity, namely, people will buy what they can afford and what they are accessible to. Stage two is the consumption of quality, namely, they will buy what is good in quality and special in style. Stage three is the consumption of mental satisfaction which emphasizes the mental experience and interpersonal communication. Whether the consumption happens or not depends on the consumers' personal preference. During such process, the psychological value wins functional value. Therefore, it is strictly consumption of feeling rather than wholly perceptual consumption.

People's consumption patterns have been post-modernized in today's wealthy and prosperous society. The consumption of automobiles in such a special era has stepped into stage three with the cars' popularization and the overspread of automotive advertising. When people purchase cars, they value not only the cars' function but also the mental satisfaction the cars can bring.

III. AUTOMOBILES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ROLAND BARTHES'S SEMEIOTICS AND JEAN BAUDRILLARD'S THEORY OF "SYMBOL CONSUMPTION"

A. Semeiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure, the French litterateur, theorist as well as critic, has pointed in his famous theory of "linguistic semeiotics" that "Symbol is the combination of form and meaning". He called the form "signifier" and the meaning "signified" and emphasize that "linguistic symbols are arbitrary while any combination of the signifier and the signified forms an arbitrary linguistic entity." Later, Roland Barthes extended the theory with his Semeiotics. He pointed out that signifier means symbols, images, objects and characters which is visible and touchable for people. The signifier implies some underlying meanings. As to the signified, it means the connotation (the underlying meaning) that the signifier carries. Roland Barthes extended such definition to the field of clothes, packaging, advertising as well as pop culture etc. Through the colorful and interesting advertisements, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard have perceived the hidden mysterious culture. They found that

human beings are living in a world full of symbols. Every field of life, for example, food and drink, clothes, cars and furniture, has its particular semeiotic system.

B. *Jean Baudrillard's symbol consumption*

The French scholar Jean Baudrillard made a profound analysis on the current consumption culture. He maintains that the consumption in the modern society has already gone beyond the actual need and has become symbolic, namely, from material consumption to spirit consumption. People buy certain products or services for seeking some feelings and meanings contained in them instead of purely seeking for their use value. The trend of being symbolic and semiotic makes consumption more and more diversified and individualized. For example, people go to McDonald's for showing they are part of the fast-speed society; they go to the Starbucks for the feeling of being petty bourgeois instead of enjoying the taste of its coffee; they prefer "BMW" to "HYUNDAI" simply because it makes one feel that he is somebody. Hence, symbol consumption makes the products more "culture-loaded" and marks people's higher hierarchy of consumption as well as the elevation of quality of life. The cultural connotation a product carries has enriched the meaning of consumption and satisfied people's mental as well as physical needs. Buying such products may reflect one's identity to the values they symbolize and forms a higher level of consumption style.

IV. DATE MY "CAR" IN THE CONCEPT OF SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION

A. *"Cars" in Semeiotics*

Although the man at the wheel expressed that he also welcomes male guests who come to this program with their bicycles, I'm afraid there won't be any who has the courage to do so. The Chinese Character "车", as a symbol, can be used to represent carriages, bicycles, cars, trains as well as wheelbarrows. In this case, the signifier of "车" is vehicles for transport. However, under the background of highly prosperous society where private cars become ever more popular, girls tend to find men with houses and decent cars. Here the "车", I'm afraid, symbolizes one's charisma and economic capability.

B. *Car disposes*

The first session of this program is called "the first impression". The host will introduce to the female guests 4 different cars, giving them 10 seconds to eliminate one. For example, the host will say "The first car is KIA, it is economical and suitable to those seeking individuality. The second one is BMW520, limousine for business elites. The third car is Mazda6 which targets at fashion and sports lovers. The last one is Nissan Livina, family car for those a little older." The second session is called "know one through one's car". The female guests are asked to observe the decorations, trunk and other objects in the car from which they can infer the owner's characteristics. For instance, pendants like Guan yu and Fortune Cat indicate that the owner is a business man; Mashimaro or other stuffed toys may show the owner's childlike innocence or his delicate thoughts while basketball pendant reveals that the owner's interest in sports, etc. Such details may help the female guests to form their second

impression. This article mainly focuses on the first session. So far, men are still the main consumption group for cars. However, since a girl will doll herself up for him who loves her", men also need the same "make-ups" to attract the women. Equal to the "three-second principle" in interpersonal communications which determine where the relationship will continue, the first impression through viewing the car determines whether a male guest can safely go into the second session.

V. IDEOLOGICAL ADVERTISING FOR AUTOMOBILES UNDER THE THEORIES OF SEMEIOTICS

A. *Ideological advertising*

"Ideological advertising" was firstly advocated by a Taiwan advertising agency which is represented by Xu Shunying. The company's representative work is a series of advertisements made for Taiwan Zhongxing Department Store. One slogan among the advertisements is "Hand for sleeves, feet for shoes, and body for clothes. Three days without shopping is impossible". From the example, we can see that Ideological advertising refers to those "fulfilling the target consumers' unusual mental needs rather than just physical needs." In such advertisements, product information is less important than the feelings, atmospheres, and plots as well as values that the advertisements can render." The ideology usually takes the form of recessive values in created circumstances. Without any fixed promoting slogans, ideological advertising makes consumers form an imaginative image of the products based on their fancy envision. Besides, consumers will also link the products with certain lifestyles or personalities. Therefore, such advertisements are overwhelmingly attractive, especially for the young consumers. According to Louis Althusser, "Social practices both determine the characteristics of the individual and give her or him an idea of the range of properties they can have, and of the limits of each social practice. Our values, desires and preferences are inculcated in us by ideological practice, the sphere which has the defining property of constituting individuals as subjects".

In the ideological advertising, the signifier and the signified are no longer two strictly opposite concepts. They can be altered at the advertiser's will. "The advertisement itself is a signifier which has no traditional relation with the products it promotes. Then it produces a word which is related to the products. The new language and information it creates got its value after they go public."

B. *Ideological advertising for automobiles*

Under such background, when the consumers buy cars, they will definitely consider the cars' target market. Actually, since the appearance of advertisement, the values and concepts it aims to render to the consumers far outweighed the material functions, which is especially true to the advertising for automobiles. In the modern society, product consumption is actually symbol consumption. The products become just symbols in the advertisements. For example, the advertisement of BMW expresses again and again its high-quality and elegance with Madonna and Clive Owen as its mouthpiece; the advertisement of "SUBARU" Forester directed by Feng Xiaogang use the scenes of Yang Liping's elegant dance,

winding mountain roads, rapid flowing rivers and fireworks as an introduction to the idea of “have my own way”; “Chevrolet”, through several micro movies named “love my love”, tries to forge its consumers’ image as “loving pursuit, knowing expressing”; “Chery QQ” has successfully created an image of “fashion” and “life-enjoying”; “Volkswagenwerk-BEETLE” is a symbol of specialty; “Benz SMART” is modernized landaulet; the micro movie made by “JEEP”, which is named “no story no life” uses the story of Liu zai to encourage people sticking to their dreams. In the Spring Festival Gala this year, “JEEP” has invited Wang shi, Xie Tingfeng and Liu Qiangdong to be its mouthpieces, all of whom are successful persons. Both Wang and Liu endorsed for “Grand Cherokee” while Xie spoke for “Cherokee”. The former two are both mature successful businessmen while Xie represents the inspiring youngsters, which shows JEEP’s brand value of “freedom, aspiration, purity” as well as the trend of brand innovation. Whatever the form of advertising is, such advertisements, as the signifier, give the cars distinctive meanings (the signified). People’s consumption emphasized the semeiotic value a product has to express their desire for distinctiveness, taste as well as social status. Apart from the price and outer appearance of a car, the ideology a car embodies becomes more and more important for the consumers.

Therefore, what elements an automobile advertisement should have depend on the target consumers’ individual and social preference as well as their consuming psychology. A car which is specially made to cater to the need of certain consumers will make the process of consumption easier and simpler. Once the consumers are convinced that one brand is suitable to them, they will show special preference to it and feel emotionally attached to it. Hence, the value of automobile advertising lies in the feeling or emotion it creates in the consumers.

VI. CONCLUSION

The symbol consumption driven by advertisements has cultivated peoples’ higher demand for esthetic taste, which made the line between the mass culture and the elite culture. As a result, the wall between the mass and the art is broken. The modern consumption pattern becomes ever democratic and individualized with the art and aesthetics no longer monopolized by the elites. Individuals can express themselves through different brands they chose. Nevertheless, it will make some consumers addicted to the living condition depicted in the advertisements. In consequence, they may have much unnecessary consumption just for mental satisfaction and identity recognition. “Advertisements evoke one’s desire”. Today, the market is filled with products yet people’s consumption desire is keeping expanding. In result, the meaning of life is totally ignored due to the temptation of the media as well as the business world.

Date My Car appears when the private cars become more popular while not owned by everyone. Social and economic development is irresistible. But we can gear it to a correct direction. Undoubtedly, houses and cars can reflect one’s economic status. But they cannot be used as the primary standards when judging a person. To sum up, I hope that

everyone in this world can keep their individuality as possible as they can so that they will not get lost in such a materialized and symbolized world.

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