

Disciplines for Female in Bra Advertisements of China Brands

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Abstract. This article selects two representative bra brands in China- Cosmo Lady and Neiwai. The case study method is used to comparatively analyze advertising content in the form of pictures and videos posted by the two brands on the social media platform Weibo. The respective changes were researched from the longitudinal comparison point of view, while the similarities and dissimilarities, in terms of promotional methods, theme expression, and so forth, between the two brands were compared. The results of the analysis above are separated into three sections in the article, which are the focus on the promotion of product design, female images presented by amateur or unknown models, and celebrities selected by brands. It is found that both brands consciously incorporate feminism into their advertisement. In general, the awakening of body and self-awareness conveyed by Neiwai conforms to the essence of feminism more than Cosmo Lady. However, the discipline towards women has become even more subtle, hidden in the logic and semiotics meanings of the subtext. Furthermore, driven by economic interests, consumerism in bra advertisements simplifies and distorts feminism gradually.

Keywords: Bra advertising; women image; female identity.

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction of brands

1.1.1. Cosmo Lady

Founded in 1998, Cosmo Lady has a 32-year brand history and is the first lingerie company in mainland China to be listed on the Hong Kong stock market. The selection of Cosmo Lady's brand ambassadors has undergone four major changes. Early underwear advertisements in the domestic market focus on sexiness, and the series of sexy advertisements shot by Cosmo Lady in 2012 are typical cases of this period, which were once banned by CCTV. The keyword of the brand ambassador during this period was Sexy Goddess. In 2019, Cosmo Lady replaced its brand ambassador, whose keyword was replaced by Nation's daughter. The visual style of the advertisement also went through a major change so that the degree of nudity was greatly lowered. In 2022, Cosmo Lady launched a group portrait endorsement campaign, inviting ordinary women to participate in the promotion. In the same year, it officially announced a professional singer with non-traditional femininity, different from the previous two celebrities, as the brand ambassador.

1.1.2. Neiwai

Neiwai was founded in 2012. It targets consumers defined as "a new generation of female consumers who live in at least second-tier cities. With purchasing power, they have relatively mature brand awareness and aesthetic tastes." When the lingerie market of mainland China was still dominated by underwire bras, Neiwai has been selling underwire-free bras as its main products since it was first established. In addition, the brand has always claimed to pay attention to women's needs, trying to convey feminism. Neiwai prefers to display diverse occupations, body shapes, etc. of females in the campaign.

1.2. Research Questions

How is the image of women constructed in underwear advertisements? From the popularity of underwire bras to underwire-free bras, the structural design has indeed reduced the constraints on women. Lingerie brands are also trying to convey feminism in brand promotion, but have they

achieved this? Are there still implicit disciplines for women? This paper aims to discover the answers to these questions via comparative analysis.

1.3. Research Significance

Research on underwear brands from the feminist point of view mostly chose foreign brands such as Victoria's Secret, which are typical. However, their campaign in the global market even in the China mainland market cannot fully represent the development of bra advertising in China.

1.4. Research Method

The article conducts a comparative analysis of Cosmo Lady and Neiwai through visual materials, which are videos and static posters posted by respective official accounts on the social media named Weibo. For Cosmo Lady, 30 photographs of 3 brand ambassadors and 20 short films are mainly analyzed, while around 50 photographs and 23 short films of Neiwai are examined.

2. Literature Review

China's researches on local underwear brands focus on various aspects such as style, color, pattern, structure, and craftsmanship, mainly analyzing the evolution of bras before modern times, that is, before the 1950s. Combined with a perspective of feminism, these explain the cultural and ideological changes reflected in the history of underwear development, specifically concentrating on the relations between changes in the ideology of bra and the women's liberation movement and emphasizing the interactive phenomenon between body concepts and bra design. The article "Chinese Women's Bra Cultural Phenomenon from a Gender Perspective" analyzed the underwear cultural phenomena in ancient and modern times first, and then discussed the gender consciousness in contemporary bra brand advertisements from three aspects: advertising slogans, soft advertising texts, and underwear shows [1].

Regarding contemporary underwear advertisements, Huang Xiaoman divided the sexual appeal strategies of women's underwear print advertisements into three types, which are functional appeal, symbolic appeal, and imaginative appeal, and explained the persuasive mechanisms of the three appeals [2]. Li Yuzhi started from the perspective of "gender-reversed" endorsement, mainly observing the case of men endorsing women's underwear brands and analyzing the gender-reversed endorsement in underwear advertisements [3]. Sun Weiqing used semiotics to compare the similarities and differences between male and female underwear advertisements of the same brand, pointing out the patriarchal ideology implicit in the advertisements that disciplines both sexes, as well as the de-professionalization and dreaminess of female images [4].

The brands chosen by most researchers were mainly foreign brands, such as Victoria's Secret. Gender studies on underwear brands often utilize communication theory to analyze their promotional content and methods. For instance, researchers used semiotics to reflect on how Victoria's Secret sells sexy symbols claiming women's liberation to achieve secret persuasion for women to obey social criteria, which is in essence an obstacle to women's liberation [5]. Dong Miao's research, based on the analysis of Victoria's Secret, pointed out the trend that symbolic value and visual function squeeze out use value in women's bra consumption. Dong Miao also utilized Lacan's gaze theory, Foucault's power theory, and Deleuze's desire analysis to explore how patriarchy and consumerism collude in underwear advertisements to achieve the purpose of capital by disciplining women's bodies from the perspective of power [6]. When studying underwear advertisements, one cannot avoid the issue of body consumption. In addition to the obvious consumption of women's bodies by men, Zhao Yue provided the female perspective, interviewing the female audiences of Victoria's Secret campaigns and analyzing the impact of their viewing behavior [7].

In recent years, there have been a few feminist studies on domestic underwear brands. These studies mainly based on the perspective of women-empowerment advertising, reflecting on the

hypocrisy of domestic advertising empowerment and doubting the authenticity of "speaking for women" [8].

3. Comparative Analysis

3.1. Emphasis of the Product Promotion

Cosmo Lady's main products are often made of complex lace fabrics, even with ornaments, and with complex straps. Delicate bras are classical productions of gender stereotype, symbolizing femininity constructed by social criteria and operating as a material sensation to remind women not to obey the criteria [9]. Furthermore, decoration is not necessary for the use value of underwear. Since there is only one line of small text on the promotional picture to introduce the practical functions of the product, and the boasting about the exquisiteness and beauty of the decorations is often strengthened, these decorations functioning as decorative symbols have become the key indicators to distinguish different products. The emphasis of product promotion has shifted from use value to symbolic value. The visual effects of underwear have replaced the priority of practical functions such as covering, warmth and protection, leading women to symbol consumption [6]. Neiwai has made improvements in this regard. Most of its bra products are solid colors with simple styles. The text in the promotional pictures is prominent, and mainly contains basic product information such as raw materials, functions, suitable groups.

3.2. Female Images Presented by Ordinary People or Unknown Models

In the 100-person endorsement recruitment program initiated by Cosmo Lady, participants shot a video for the program, telling their own stories and recommending a bra. The basic logic of the video content is: Cosmo Lady is professional in making underwear, and "I", as a professional woman in "my" area, choose Cosmo Lady's bra. First, the areas are usually fashion or beauty. Although women of different ages and professions are called upon to participate, the vast majority of participants in the 20 related videos released are fashion and beauty bloggers, with only two related to sports. This is a limitation on the types of female bloggers and the imagination of female professions. Furthermore, the concentration on expertise is placed on the selection of underwear, but description of good bras is still revolving about fashion, cup size increase, gathering, etc. The word "sexy" is rarely used directly. However, the function of visually enlarging the breasts is linked to "fashion", and visually enlarging the breasts in the traditional context often means being sexier, which actually implies that the standard of beauty is sexy curves. Likewise, all videos promote the idea that there is more than one standard of female beauty, but the women appearing in the videos meet the standards of "white, skinny and young" without exception. Even the woman, who is a mother, is titled hot mommy. Finally, there is insufficient and inappropriate expression in showing women's abilities. For instance, one of the videos shows a girl who calls herself a football blogger. In addition to showing up with makeup and a pink floral skirt, she even falls down while playing football. This is not a general expression of a professional athlete. Instead, it further deepens the viewer's stereotype that women are not good at sports, and the establishment of the so-called professional image is therefore ineffective.

In comparison, Neiwai presents a more diverse image of women. As an illustration, in the documentary "NO BODY IS NOBODY" shot by the brand, women of different ages, skin colors, and body shapes wear the brand's underwear and confidently show their bodies in front of the camera. This contributes to breaking the stereotype that underwear models should have fair skin, thin limbs, flat abdomen and plump breasts. The director also lets the models show off their armpit hair, wrinkles and even post-operative scars. This fits the theme that the brand wants to express – everyone's body shape has its own characteristics, and there is no need to force yourself to cater to the so-called perfect body standard. The content fits the theme that the brand claims: everyone's body shape has its own characteristics, and there is no need to force yourself to cater to the so-called perfect body standard. At the same time, choosing amateurs as advertising models is also uncommon in campaigns in China's market.

In terms of the video theme, the video campaign “Embrace Your Movement” is based on the standard of women with passion for sports and unquestionable professional skills. Representatives from various sports communities were invited to participate in the filming. The types of sports include not only Yoga and Pilates, but also strength sports such as Muay Tai and combat sports. Combat sports, which are often considered more suitable for men and are often associated with violence. Instead, the video featuring a woman who is practicing the sport chose to connect the meaning of combat sports with attitudes towards life and exploration of self, denying the martial art’s inevitable association with conflict and violence through the protagonist’s words. It also pointed out that “martial art is about understanding the world and life, and to explore the ultimate potential of the body.” This dissolves the subtle dualistic conflict.

According to the analysis above, Neiwai has a deeper understanding of diversified images than Cosmo Lady. Still, both of them have similar problems. Firstly, when showing the dilemma of women, the tricks of these films are cliché. The audio clips mostly consist of women describing how they felt after being criticized for not meeting ideal body standards, along with the women showing their bodies in front of the camera in confidence. Secondly, the solutions to this dilemma can be basically divided into "spontaneous self-acceptance" and "acquired self-acceptance". The former is through trusting themselves, while the latter mainly relies on the recognition of partners or friends. It seems that as long as women master the ability to ignore external evaluations, or are lucky enough to meet someone who accepts her, they can gain her identity. Thirdly, both brands portray the bra as a means of expressing women’s identity intend to make them feel empowered. Cosmo Lady promotes the consistency in professional design of products and professional image of consumer. Ristock and Joan Pennell suggest that empowerment means "to enhance our ability to control our own lives, or to develop a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one's life" [10]. While Neiwai links the consumer’s pursuit of comfort in bra-purchasing with the feminist’s pursuit of freedom in self-identification. In this sense, the kind of empowerment, which is easily accessible and affordable for women through consumption, is the acquirement of purchasing power in essence [10].

3.3. Female Images Presented by Celebrities as Spokespersons

As the targeted groups were determined in different periods, the public image of the spokespersons chosen by Cosmo Lady changed from sexy and mature to youthful girls and then to neutral temperament, with the poster style changing significantly accordingly. During this period when sexiness was the key word, dark colors such as dark blue and dark red were the main colors. In order to display a mature appearance, more parts of body were exposed, with the front or back of underwear. The body curves are directly exposed, suggesting the correlation between bra and sexiness. When younger girls were the target customers, actresses known as the national daughter were chosen as the brand ambassador. Posters mostly chose refreshing and light colors. They also tried hard to avoid exposure, and almost only the ambassador’s neck and arms could be seen. It turned out that only the shoulder straps of the bra were displayed. Subsequently, Cosmo Lady changed its promoting strategy to embracing diversity, by choosing a singer with non-traditional femininity as the brand ambassador. The singer had short hair and her body curves were often covered up with oversize suits in posters.

Before 2021, brand ambassadors who collaborating with Neiwai are widely considered to be slim and elegant. Neiwai's posters are low in exposure. Spokespersons rarely shoot commercials for underwear products without wearing jackets and leggings, so that they only expose their front waists and necks.

As a matter of fact, there is little inconsistency in body shape and visual age among these spokespersons: they are all relatively slender and delicate. Except for the changes in the use of symbols such as the exposed parts, degree, and color, the sets of the poster are decorative scenes all the time. Due to the special nature of underwear products, such an arrangement is reasonable. Whether indoors or outdoors, the characters have no interaction with the scenes, and their occupations (if not knowing the brand ambassadors’ career in advance) and interpersonal relationships cannot be identified from the visual effects. Brand ambassadors are highly isolated in the promoting posters

mentioned above. These women are utilized as the symbol to represent a certain type of femininity and collective identities [11].

Unlike ordinary people or nameless models, whether brand ambassadors suffer from sexism or not is not shown in advertisements. Brand ambassadors are packaged to be confident and generous, and looked perfect in every aspect. As mentioned above, the extent of nudity in posters has gradually decreased. As the underwear cannot be displayed well when it is covered by outer clothing, brands choose unknown models to complete the throughout display of its underwear products. In these pictures, unknown models simply wear underwear, showing their bodies in full view. Their key body parts are even captured in close-up in the illustration posters with more details. The brand ambassadors have merely been shown to have experienced the plight of ordinary women (especially when the campaigns mainly show the plight of appearance), and also have privilege to wear clothes in front of the camera. Women who hold the dual identities of celebrities and brand spokespersons are idealized images that brands intend to construct, while amateur or unknown models are responsible for being objectified and eliciting empathy. These distinctions are created according to titles offered by brands, resulting in separation within the sisterhood of female.

4. Conclusion

The choice of spokespersons of Cosmo Lady and the transform in advertising style reflect its attempt to adjust its positioning from sexy and youthful to diversified. Nevertheless, in practice, these changes often remain at the level of superficial symbolism and void slogans, and in essence still discipline women to obey patriarchal standards. Neiwai's presentation of female images, which is an improvement over Cosmo Lady, is groundbreaking in China and indeed various. When it comes to showing the dilemma of female, mostly revolving about low self-esteem with their appearance, both brands seem powerless. The solution against the dilemma is simplified, and it is nothing but a repeated explanation of self-acceptance. In the brands' narrative, this self-acceptance sometimes needs to rely on the praise from others. In addition, Cosmo Lady and Neiwai divide models into two categories: one is for consumers to project themselves and arouse empathy, and the other is to build an idealized image for consumers. This is not only a differentiation within women, but also, to some extent, reflects the consumerism essence of advertising empowerment.

The shortcomings of this article are: first, it only researches on posters and video materials, and does not systematically study the promotional text; second, the backwardness of women's awareness in bra advertising in China is not only caused by the brands' lack of women's awareness and profit-driven reasons. The lack of structural criticism is also affected by cultural censorship and other factors, which is not discussed.

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