

Gender Symbols and the Reproduction of Stereotypes in Feminist Advertising

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Abstract. This study investigates feminist advertising issues in the context of rising female consciousness, conducting a detailed analysis of their characteristics from a semiotic perspective. Through case studies of commercial advertisements from brands like Dove and Nike, we propose strategic recommendations based on research findings. Grounded in symbolic consumption theory, the study explores how commercial advertisements reconstruct feminist symbolism through approaches such as "authentic beauty" and "sports empowerment." The findings reveal that while these advertisements ostensibly promote diversity and inclusion, they essentially reduce feminism to consumable symbols. They subtly influence female consumers' aesthetic perceptions, fostering new aesthetic norms and consumption expectations. This process traps women in commercial appropriation and value shifts, diluting consumer agency. The research provides valuable insights for understanding gender representation and symbolic forms in commercial advertising, offering references for optimizing advertisements design. This study provides theoretical references and strategic suggestions for how advertising practices can truly respond to feminist demands. Future research can further focus on consumers' interpretation and resistance to symbolic feminist advertisements, as well as the differences in acceptance effects caused by symbolic differences in cross-cultural contexts.

Keywords: Symbolic consumption; gender stereotypes; simulacra/hyperreality; greenwashing; intersectionality.

1. Introduction

In recent years, global awareness of women's rights has intensified, accompanied by widespread feminist advertising phenomena that attract significant attention. This trend has prompted many women to prioritize self-determination and demand redefined brand values. Scholars have made notable progress in studying commercial behaviors like "pink tax" [1].

Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the characteristics and symbolic significance of feminist advertising, along with its impacts on female consumers. The findings provide insights into the relationship between media and gender, help identify shortcomings in advertising communication, encourage media and commercial organizations to demonstrate greater responsibility, guide public understanding of gender issues, and foster a positive social climate within the advertising industry.

The research focuses on: Exploring how feminist advertisements influence gender power structures, analyzing their characteristics and significance; Guiding brands to avoid "values-based greenwashing" (greenwashing) while strengthening social responsibility; Analyzing patterns and mechanisms through which advertisements shape public gender perceptions; Conducting interdisciplinary studies to examine interactions between gender and other characteristics.

Core question: Does feminist advertising suppress or reinforce gender stereotypes? This paper systematically reviews existing research in this field using content analysis, objectively describes various symbols in advertising texts, then elucidates the implicit gender ideologies and their impacts within these advertisements, clarifying research questions and directions. One primary objective is to promote gender equality practices in advertising creation and brand communication, providing guidance for optimizing advertising strategies. By applying symbol consumption theory and analyzing real-world advertising cases, this study proposes several optimization suggestions.

2. Literature Review

This study specifically examines the "feminist elements" in advertisements (such as slogans like "independence" and "authentic beauty," or scenes depicting women as engineers) to analyze their creation and dissemination. The research employs methods of "deconstructing advertising details" and "analyzing symbolic meanings," combined with contemporary feminist perspectives (such as gender fluidity and multifaceted challenges faced by women) to uncover deeper logic.

Specifically, it analyzes advertising cases from beauty, fashion, and health industries, focusing on how visual elements, text, and background music are strategically assembled to package "feminism" into an acceptable narrative. The theoretical tools used include:

Barthes 'Secondary Sign System and Mythological Theory [2]: "Independence" and "Autonomy" The core of feminist political claims — lies in women's right to independence (such as economic autonomy and decision-making freedom), serving as a weapon against gender discrimination and social injustice. However, Barthes 'theory reveals that advertisements reprocess this "political symbol" into a "consumption myth." — Instead of advocating for "how to gain independence," they promote slogans like "buy this lipstick = the standard accessory for independent women" or "use this cream = self-love empowerment." The original political connotations are stripped away, leaving only the commercialized notion that "spending money grants the 'independence' label."

Baudrillard's Theory of Simulation and Symbolic Consumption [3]: "Simulation" refers to "artificial substitutes," while "hyperreality" means "the semblance of reality surpassed by artifice." Baudrillard's theory exposes how these simulated images gradually replace real gender issues (such as unequal pay in workplaces, maternity discrimination), making people believe "feminism means living like the ads." This drives "symbolic consumption" —you're not just buying products, but an illusion of becoming that "independent woman" portrayed in advertisements.

Kress and Van Leeuwen's multimodal discourse analysis [4]: "multimodality" refers to various elements in advertisements. Visually, they often use cool tones (conveying strength), high-angle shots (conveying authority), and clenched-fist gestures (symbolizing resistance) when promoting "female power"; textually, they pair slogans like "Be your own queen" and "Take charge of your life." All these details serve to "make you recognize this 'feminism' and ultimately pay for it."

Third-wave feminist theory [5]: Gender identity is not innate but "acted out." Feminist advertisements effectively link "gender performance" with consumption. For instance, "wearing androgynous clothing is acting independent" and "not marrying or having children is acting autonomous," implying that "you must purchase specific products and adopt certain styles to 'perform' the identity of a 'progressive woman.'"

However, existing research has the following limitations:

Current studies on feminist advertisements have yet to clarify three key aspects in the digital era: First, they fail to properly examine how influencers and ordinary users transform feminist symbols into new forms when posting content related to brand topics on platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

Second, they lack systematic comparisons of different contexts, such as how the original meaning of #MeToo in the West becomes diluted and distorted when adapted by local brands for advertising in East Asia.

Third, they fail to explain how new technologies like algorithmic recommendations and virtual influencers fundamentally alter the creation and dissemination of feminist symbols. Therefore, this paper answers the above questions based on Horkheimer and Adorno's cultural industry theory, as well as some other theories.

Methodological Expansion: This study employs AI technology to analyze vast advertising databases, identifying feminist symbols within them. By comparing regional variations across Europe, America, and Asia, it explores how these symbols differ across cultures.

The research not only provides evidence for establishing advertising standards and gender equality policies but also helps the industry create authentic feminist campaigns that avoid "trending gimmicks."

It equips consumers to discern marketing tactics behind advertisements, preventing them from being misled by "progress" slogans. Ultimately, the project aims to build a comprehensive theoretical framework that clarifies the complex contradictions in these advertising symbols, charting a new path for gendered advertising studies in the digital era.

3. Case Analysis: Semiotic Manifestations in Typical Advertisements

3.1. Dove's "Authentic Beauty"

Dove's "Authentic Beauty" Campaign addresses women's anxieties about appearance through relatable experiments and short films. It asserts "Don't belittle yourself – your authenticity is beauty," while deliberately avoiding Photoshop retouching to prove "authenticity is true beauty" — This "anti-perfection" approach positions the brand as understanding and supporting women, thereby fostering brand recognition.

In essence, this marketing campaign challenges the rigid notion that "beauty is confined to a single standard" by showcasing diverse female beauty. It breaks the stereotype of "slimness as beauty," asserting that every woman—whether curvy, full-figured, or slender—has her own unique charm. While traditional beauty standards often prioritize fair skin, the campaign directly challenges this assumption. It shows women of all skin tones (dark, medium, or fair) equally, challenging the outdated belief that "pale skin is the only standard."

Though Doffin's ads appear to promote "beauty in all forms," they ultimately reinforce the societal expectation of "self-perceived beauty." By adopting subtle variations of authenticity, the campaign achieves its goal through carefully crafted visuals. Doffin avoids the common practice of photo retouching that distorts reality, instead focusing on authentic details—like using real people rather than perfect-faced models, preserving natural pores, fine lines, and skin imperfections. Instead of blunt slogans, the campaign employs innovative approaches like "authentic beauty sketches" and "choose your own beauty," backed by statistics: "Only 4% of women feel truly beautiful."

This approach transforms personal insecurities like "I don't think I'm good-looking" into a social phenomenon of shared anxiety, striking a chord instantly. It makes people feel "this isn't just fiction but something real," boosting its credibility overnight. While "authenticity" is cleverly crafted, scholars have exposed Doffin's own industry ties: The "perfect industrial system" it criticizes is actually the very ecosystem that sustains its existence.

3.2. Proya Gender Non-Boundary Gender Equality Initiative

Put simply, Pulaia's "Gender Without Limits" campaign breaks from the conventional beauty industry playbook. Instead of focusing on "how women can become more beautiful," it expands its narrative to address the social issue of gender equality. In plain terms, this means "not just selling products but engaging in meaningful discussions about societal issues that truly resonate with people." Its core slogan, "Gender isn't a barrier—prejudice is," hits home with its direct challenge to outdated gender stereotypes: like the old adage "men should be tough and never cry, women should be soft and gentle," or the notion that "men should work outside while women stay home cooking and raising kids."

Pulaia aims to awaken people from these outdated notions through this campaign, urging them to break free from such constraints. Fundamentally, the brand challenges traditional norms by breaking down rigid gender roles, promoting more authentic portrayals of men and women. The core message is "Men don't need to be tough guys, and women shouldn't be confined to 'beauty'." The campaign achieves this through two key initiatives:

First, it challenges men's stereotype of "not having to pretend to be strong." Traditionally, men were expected to handle responsibilities, avoid emotional expressions, and refrain from household chores—only to be seen as "doing men's work." Pulaia shows that men can also display soft emotions and perform "delicate tasks," without needing to maintain a "tough guy persona."

Second, it redefines women's purpose beyond mere appearance. Many brands previously focused on promoting "fair skin, slim figures, and perfect proportions" when showcasing women.

This brand breaks the mold by spotlighting women as engineers, athletes, and corporate leaders, showcasing their competence and boldness. Proya's copywriting defies expectations by directly challenging outdated stereotypes. For instance, when people used to mock someone "running like a girl" as implying weakness or slowness, Proya reimagined it as "running like yourself" —stripping away gender labels to emphasize that speed and form matter, not gender.

Their visuals push boundaries too: A woman gets asked about work-life balance at her first job, while a man is criticized for not pursuing promotion, effectively exposing this "double standard" of gender bias. Or when driving out, those with poor driving skills are called "female drivers," while men with less strength are mocked as "not acting like a man." This directly exposes how such prejudices harm both women and men, causing injustice to both genders. The most successful aspect of this campaign is that it made many people feel "finally someone is speaking up about this issue." Consequently, after seeing it, people were willing to share their own experiences: "I was rejected in an interview because I'm a woman" or "As a man, I got laughed at for carrying a baby out —' you don't look like a man.' " With increasing public discussion, the topic of "gender bias" naturally came into the spotlight, sparking more attention and debate.

Even media outlets like **Beijing News** praised it, calling it "a model of feminist marketing by a Chinese brand" for its excellent integration of commercial promotion and social discourse. However, controversies persist critics accuse the brand of "brainwashing through awakening" [6], while others question its core principle: "You talk the talk but don't walk the walk – you're just profiting under the guise of 'gender equality'." Critics argue that the company's "awakening marketing" ostensibly claims to "break gender biases," but fundamentally profits from women. Its products are predominantly marketed to female consumers. Although advertisements claim, "no need to pursue white, young, or slim," the essence remains promoting skincare and cosmetics – products inherently tied to "appearance anxiety."

4. The Triple Sign Mechanism of Feminist Advertising

Selective Presentation Mechanism. In plain terms, advertisers often "play it safe" by framing issues around individuals, making consumers ponder "how you would feel" rather than addressing macro-level challenges like systemic workplace discrimination or significant pay gaps [7]. It's also noteworthy that Western nations have long championed women's independence while perpetuating racial and class biases, revealing pervasive advertising tactics [5, 8].

A classic example is the beauty industry's bold claims about "women can choose not to wear makeup – a freedom," which sounds genuinely considerate but hides consumption traps: The "no-makeup" ideal isn't about "skincare simplicity," but rather using their products like bare-faced creams or concealer to create an illusion of minimal makeup. This constitutes "cultural displacement": transforming "the right to freedom from makeup" into "demanding 'pseudo-bare-faced products'." Consumers believe they're pursuing liberation but are actually being subtly pushed into spending – their so-called "freedom" depends on purchasing these products [3]. Advertisements frequently employ pseudo-rebellious narratives to boost brand awareness. This "pseudo-rebellion" involves "pretending to defy rules while secretly adhering to them (consumer norms)." Brands may claim to "break prejudices," but ultimately still encourage consumption through subtle manipulation.

The lingerie brand "We Oppose the Objectification of Women" (meaning "not treating women's bodies as decorative vases") still featured women in sexy lingerie in their ads, with camera angles focusing on body curves. While this appears to be a "rebellion," it ultimately relies on "sexiness" to attract attention, making consumers feel that "buying these bras means you're both sexy and independent" —ultimately serving the purpose of selling lingerie. Nike's "Dream Runner" campaign perfectly illustrates this phenomenon. Originally, female athletes' struggles aimed to break the systemic bias that "women are unsuitable for competitive sports," but the ad completely ignores this,

instead portraying it as an inspirational story of "a girl succeeding through her own efforts," ultimately emphasizing "Wearing Nike shoes, you can chase your dreams too" [9].

Thirdly, the "emotional and identity construction mechanism" further commodifies emotions and collective identity: advertisements hijack movement-related sentiments like anger, unity, and self-liberation, repackaging them as co-created brand materials. Taking Dove's "Real Beauty Action" as an example, the brand collects women's personal narratives through user-generated content strategies without addressing its parent company's exploitative operations[1]. Meanwhile, social media interactions (such as hashtag challenges and filter marketing) McDonaldize feminist practices, transforming them into quantifiable, standardized, and efficiency-driven consumer behaviors. Under the context of the "she economy," women may appear to gain more choice and power to define themselves, but they remain trapped in the shackles of market logic.

Capital constantly creates new demands and aesthetic norms, which leads consumers to equate purchasing behavior with supporting feminism, and gradually uses consumerism to dissolve and replace the critical force of feminism [10].

5. Conclusion

Building upon previous research, this study explores the role of feminist symbols in consumer culture. The analysis reveals two opposing characteristics: "resistance" and "discipline". The former refers to advertisers actively "breaking stereotypes" and creating new consumption concepts to encourage female consumers, while the latter deliberately confines women's consumption perspectives within specific frameworks.

Many brands today champion "female empowerment" slogans like "buy this for independence" or "use this to love yourself", ostensibly advocating for women but essentially turning feminism into a sales tool. Consumers may claim pursuing equality, yet they're essentially just making purchases. Feminism's original mission is to critique injustice, but when hijacked by capital, it becomes "consumption as justice" – stripping away its critical essence. This can be summarized as: Women must "take control" and avoid being trapped by capital. While this study has yielded valuable insights for future research, it demonstrates how feminist symbols function in commercial contexts through theoretical-practical integration, proposing corresponding countermeasures. However, the paper still has limitations. Future research should further examine how digital platform algorithms influence feminist ideologies to reach more comprehensive conclusions.

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