

# Study on the Symbolic Construction of Female Stereotypes in TV Advertisements

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## Abstract:

Since television advertisements entered the field of mass communication in the 20th century, the presentation of female images in advertisements has been influenced by gender stereotypes for a long time. Despite the recent increase in female subjectivity, the values behind them still face the problem of “breaking without standing.” This study suggests that the impact of stereotypes on the portrayal of women in television advertisements from the early 20th century to the present is mainly due to their goal of promoting consumption and not making necessary adjustments to their values. This study found that using visual and auditory symbols deepens the impact of gender stereotypes on television advertising communication, and consumerist values influence current advertising communication.

**Keywords:** TV advertising; Female image; Stereotypes; Symbolic construction

## 1. Introduction

Television advertising is a form of advertising carried on television media, characterized by a high degree of concentration of information, and its mediating effect is subtle (Wang, 2019). As one of modern society’s most important media products, advertising uses rich artistic techniques to convey product information most intuitively and vividly. It has the advantages of rich expressiveness, strong infectivity, fast dissemination speed, and wide dissemination. Therefore, it conveys the latest information about goods and services to induce consumption and reflects the social relationship pattern we are in, Marking the development trend of social culture (Li, 2017). The construction of female images in television advertisements is influenced by stereotypes, and female images are deliberately weakened. The main reason for this phenomenon is that men have long dominated social culture (Liu & Qian, 2021). As women age, their family values gradually strengthen, while their social values weaken. The portrayal of female characters in television advertisements, whether “a virtuous wife and mother” or “youthful and beautiful,” is a singular portrayal of their image by the mass media. It reveals a symbol of gender inequality and also reflects the penetration of gender power relations in social relations (Dan Min, Hou Ruonan, 2022). With the improvement of social status and the strengthening of economic strength, contemporary women pursue material independence and aspire to meet their spiritual needs. They pursue gender equality, realize their social values, and aspire to dispel the stereotypes of women’s images in society (Song, 2020).

This study is based on the reality of television advertising

communication and combines text analysis methods to analyze television advertising texts that present female images. This article argues that due to the influence of gender stereotypes, the symbolic construction of female images in television advertisements tends to be singular. Society influences advertising, and female images appear diverse at different stages, but stereotypes are difficult to break through. From the perspective of elite discourse, diverse female images use visual symbols to emphasize class positioning, while in consumerism, female stereotypes are constructed using auditory symbols to convey values. TV commercials reinforce female stereotypes and are influenced by the environment, highlighting elite discourse and class positioning. Under consumerism, advertising and values interact, But chasing traffic or exacerbating the gender divide can bring hidden dangers, requiring feminist strategies to guide values. Based on case studies and findings, the symbolic construction of female images in television advertisements presents multi-level effects, reflecting social dynamics and calling for a balance between communication value and gender relations.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Female Image

For a long time, the image of women has been regarded as a commodifiable object, or in other words, “advertising=products+women.” The phenomenon of gender discrimination in media advertising has a long history (Liu & Bu, 1997). In the case study of female image, the study of female media image alienation can be seen as a remarkable achievement. Kui Hui (2020)

believes that video media provides women with a public performance context, forming an emotional community of onlookers. On the surface, television advertisements demonstrate the liberation of women's thoughts, discourse power, and independent consciousness, presenting a free, open, independent, and self-media image. However, under the traditional motive of gender inequality, these women are gradually alienated into "goods" that are shaped, selected, stared at, and consumed. Sort out the external manifestations of female media images as self-packaged beauty images, talented women images under situational performances, gentle and charming ladies' images, and charming and sexy images. They are alienated into prominent consumer awareness, strong disciplinary awareness, obvious symbolic orientation, and prominent vulgarization issues. Exploring its root lies in the realistic atmosphere of feminist degradation, platform profit-seeking motivation and platform indulgence, and the unconscious drive of the public collective. Scholars believe that both the government and the media are responsible for constructing discourse, environment, and regulatory mechanisms for the alienation of female images in television advertisements.

As the target audience, the media image provided by women in television advertisements constitutes the main content of the research topic. Compared to men, women's aesthetic and gaze perception is more concentrated and prominent. Women encounter different situations in mass communication compared to men, and research on this social phenomenon has been very rich. For example, gaze theory mainly focuses on women, which often constructs women as objects of discipline and appreciation. Maurice Merleau Ponty provided the theoretical basis for 'gaze,' believing that a universal 'other' that gazes beyond the subject exists. After the concept of "gaze" entered the field of philosophy, it was associated with self-identity and mirror self by philosophers. Michel Foucault also mentioned in "Discipline and Punishment" the "panoramic open prison," which means that the viewer is disciplined under the "gaze" of the other, resulting in certain changes in behavior and psychology, making them passively accept the value trend of the other. In the process of short video production, the lens represents the gaze of gaze, demonstrating gender imbalance in the real world. The subject and object of viewing are split into two, and the gaze and gaze of women in TV advertisements are more thought-provoking (Sun, 2004).

## 2.2 Female TV Advertising

From the perspective of feminism, television advertising consciously leans towards a male perspective, which is itself an externalization of gender politics. The

"textual world" constructed by television advertisements inherently contains a "discourse field" where women are in a disadvantaged and dominated role (Li, 2005). In TV commercials, women's only satisfaction is to "do household chores" well. Advertisements for detergents, kitchen supplies, and cooking accessories create a relaxed and happy image of housewives. In this advertising narrative, women must selflessly dedicate themselves to their families (Zeng & Yin, 2005). In recent years, under the direct influence of changes in "social needs," the female image in television advertisements has also transformed. Some neutral female images with "masculinity" and "indistinguishable gender" have been allowed to be portrayed in advertisements and even contributed to "independence" becoming the current focus on constructing a feminine temperament (Jiang, 2023).

In shaping and presenting, television advertisements draw on the construction strategies of female images in film and television works, such as the symbol construction of "stereotyped female images," which quickly promotes the integration of advertising products and female images. It can be said that the audience's stereotype saves the cost of advertising communication (Peng, 2015). According to Western feminist television research theory, television's shaping of female stereotypes can mainly be considered from two dimensions: "gender roles" and "gender characteristics." For example, stereotypes often influence women's family values, marital roles, and work performance (Tao, 2010). In recent years, the continuous emergence of female subjectivity and transgender advertising images in television advertisements is considered a product of the conspiracy of national discourse, traditional discourse, and market discourse. However, under the sales target, the change in advertising form is only a nonsubstantive and decorative evolution, causing the stereotyped values to be "broken without standing" (Li, 2017).

## 3. Case Study: Symbolic Construction of Female Stereotypes in TV Advertising

The social environment influences television advertising, and the representation of female images is not uniform at different stages of development. However, stereotypes about women are difficult to break through and are expressed in different forms. Specifically, although female images from the perspective of elite discourse adopt diverse forms of expression, using visual symbols to emphasize consumers' hierarchical positioning and attract consumers to imitate female images in television advertisements. Secondly, from the consumerist perspective, television advertising constructs images

based on female stereotypes, mobilizes rich auditory symbols, and influences the communication of advertising values.

### **3.1 Visual Symbols: Diversification of Female Images from the Perspective of Elite Discourse**

The advertisement's female actors and product images match each other, presenting diverse female images. The portrayal of independent women has become an important attempt in television advertising at the beginning of the new century. The advertisement for "Head & Shoulders" shampoo, shot by film and television actor and singer Faye Wong, was aired in 2000. In the advertisement, "I use my music to speak, and love allows me to express myself freely. New Head & Shoulders, I use it to express my hair, but there is no dandruff, this or that will do anything" was announced by Faye Wong. In the advertising slogan at the end of the film, "New Head & Shoulders means no dandruff" highlights the selling points of the product, which is in line with the image of women pursuing independence at the beginning of the new century. From the perspective of advertising studies, although there are certain differences between the independent female image constructed by Faye Wong and the traditional Chinese female image, she inherits the stereotype of women in British and American pop culture. She creates an elite discourse with the image of female white-collar workers.

In 2018, actor Yang Ying (Angelababy) adopted two strategies while filming the "Dove" chocolate advertisement. One was to invite the actress to use her nails to scratch the plastic packaging paper of the Dove chocolate, and the "rustling" sound became the main stimulus of the advertisement, constructing a communication method that used "white noise" instead of the human voice to express the product feature of "silkeness"; Secondly, the advertisement set up a bench scene in a European style garden. Actress Yang Ying and co-actor Li Yifeng imitated the early American "mime" style and sat at both ends of the bench to perform the "love at first sight" segment. The advertisement used the camera's tilt to suspend the imagination of "gravity," and the male actor slid onto the side of actress Yang Ying. The female actor randomly said, "Is it so slippery? Highlight the characteristics of the product's silky texture with the advertising slogan 'Dove, Enjoy the New Silk.'

Similar to the elite discourse construction of the "Dove" chocolate advertisement, the "Rio" cocktail advertisement links the product with the female image, constructing an elite external image. In the process of filming the "Ruiiao" cocktail advertisement in 2022, actress Zhang Zifeng constructed a set of "Japanese" style advertising scenes,

including wooden houses, Japanese interior decoration, etc., which have similarities in symbol construction with the popular Japanese film "Little Forest" of the same period. Zhang Zifeng was picking on a green plum tree, and the narrator reads, "I heard that the best time to pick plums is when they are eight o'clock ripe: just right sour, just right sweet, just right oneself." The screen then focused on the product "Rio" cocktail and pointed out, "Slightly drunk is giving oneself back," echoing the advertising slogan "Rio Slightly drunk: a person's small wine."

### **3.2 Auditory Symbols: Communication of Advertising Values from a Consumerist Perspective**

The use of songs in television advertisements is the main representative of auditory symbols, and female singers sing in advertisements and construct the characteristics of consumerism based on it, conveying specific values. In 2003, female singer Coco Li used her hair as the main promotional subject in a shampoo advertisement for "Guangzhou Houdi."

The effect of the product on hair care reflects Coco Lee's dynamic and fashionable female image characteristics. Through Coco Lee's portrayal, advertisements convey the confidence and self-worth brought by owning Houdi products. She demonstrated confidence in her exquisite attire, conveying that using the product would make her unique and more charming. The advertising slogan focuses on "Houdi is good, everyone is really good," which conveys self-expression and self-worth in line with the values of consumerism, that is, by purchasing specific products to meet personal needs and pursue happiness.

In the early 21st century, when smartphones were not popular, new products such as music phones were in a critical stage of rapidly opening up markets and promoting products. During this period, the advertising production and dissemination of such products urgently needed to construct unique values and attract consumers' attention. South Korean female singer and actress Song Hye Kyo did not rely on a single line in the "Bu Bu Gao" mobile music advertisement, using light music hummed by girls to construct a set of consumerist values influenced by Korean pop culture. This phenomenon is related to the dissemination of Korean dramas. Under the new situation, Korean dramas use various communication strategies to effectively enhance the international dissemination effect of Korean dramas, promoting the process of world cultural polycentricity.

In 2023, singer Gong Linna adapted the Guizhou Buyi folk song "Gulu Mountain Song" and created an advertising song for the fruit-flavored beverage

“Wangshan Hawthorn.” In the advertisement, Gong Linna overlapped the word “Gulu” in Buyi folk songs with the onomatopoeic word “Gulu” for drinking beverages, creating a wonderful intertextual effect. At the same time, she combined the sour and sweet taste of “hawthorn” fruit-flavored beverages with the need to drink “spicy” beverages, creating another symbol overlap. At the same time, the adaptation of key concepts in the song also includes the extensive use of overlapping words such as “Gulu Lu Zi, Gala Spicy Zi, Gala Spicy Zi La,” and the use of these words to sing the advertising slogan “Eat Spicy, Drink Hawthorn,” highlighting the sour and sweet taste of the product and suitable consumption scenarios. Influenced by consumerist culture, the song and dance advertisements also highlight the female subject image, interspersed with Gong Linna’s personalized expression in the lyrics, constructing a “big woman” image that meets the audience’s expectations.

## 4. Findings

Under the conspiracy of television advertisements, female stereotypes greatly affect the portrayal of female images in television advertisements. Influenced by the social environment, female images from the perspective of elite discourse emphasize the class positioning of consumers, making it difficult to break through the stereotypes of women. The female stereotypes constructed by television advertisements from the perspective of consumerism are mainly based on the influence of advertising values, presenting a “mirrored” media effect. This study suggests that some TV commercials use female stereotypes as a gimmick for advertising promotion, which, meets the consumer-oriented communication goals of the advertisement. However, in the new era, the completely traffic-driven communication model will lay hidden dangers and exacerbate gender tearing. Therefore, it is urgent to align with the social value of feminist strategies and promote the stable development of gender relations.

### 4.1 Female Stereotypes and Advertising Communication Effects in the New Era

Unlike Western scholars’ research on the “mirror image” of advertising, domestic scholars have relatively limited research on the negative effects of ethical and moral misconduct in advertising, mainly focusing on two major aspects: the impact on the audience and socio-economic and spiritual civilization. However, most studies still focus on the impact on the audience without truly researching the effectiveness. The communication thinking of “traffic is the king” exposes the hidden concerns of media ethical and moral misconduct and hides the negative development trend of “neglecting standards and valuing interests”

in advertising communication in the new era. From the perspective of communication effect research, advertising endorsement is a commonly used marketing method for enterprises to explore the market, attract consumers, and establish brand image. In this activity, the gender of the spokesperson will generate advertising effects in two forms: gender stereotype endorsement and anti-gender stereotype endorsement. When female spokespersons match gender attributes with “service-oriented, lifestyle-oriented, and consumer-oriented” products, that is, when gender stereotype endorsements occur, choosing a communication strategy based on female stereotypes can significantly increase advertising effectiveness.

From the dissemination of television advertisements, the “Head & Shoulders” shampoo advertisement shot by Faye Wong, the “Dove” chocolate advertisement shot by Yang Ying, and the “Ruiao” cocktail advertisement shot by Zhang Zifeng greatly amplify the characteristics of “tenderness,” “shyness,” “love for beauty,” “beauty,” and “empathy”. At the same time, in the design of advertising slogans, female images can be embedded in stereotypes. In the “Head & Shoulders” shampoo advertisement film shot by Faye Wong, “I use my music to speak, and love allows me to express myself freely. New Head & Shoulders, I use to express my hair, but there is no dandruff, so that’s all right.” Yang Ying’s “Dove” chocolate advertisement uses “Dove, enjoy silky smoothness” to interpret “love at first sight, And the “Ruiao” cocktail advertisement shot by Zhang Zifeng highlighted the advertising slogan of “Rio Slightly Drunken: One’s Little Wine,” which all strengthened the transmission of stereotypes about women in television advertisements.

Regarding the “Head & Shoulders” shampoo advertisement by Faye Wong, the television advertising communication strategy of grafting British and American pop culture in the early 21st century was widely applied to constructing women’s image. Women in advertising films are often portrayed as “vases,” promoting the celebrity effect with elite discourse, emphasizing consumer class positioning, and attracting consumers to follow suit. Regarding the “Dove” chocolate advertisement shot by Yang Ying, chocolate, as an imported product, focuses on constructing the female image in the advertisement’s consumer class positioning. The female white-collar image is regarded as the largest common denominator of potential consumers, and the female stereotypes projected on the female actors in the advertisement film reflect the characteristics of the target audience of advertising dissemination. Regarding the “Ruiao” cocktail advertisement shot by Zhang Zifeng, the “healing style” originating from Japanese popular culture has influenced the social culture of China in the new era, including the

elite discourse created (Wang, 2018). The changes in the construction of female images in television advertisements reflect a shift in consumer attitudes from “Do I need it or not?” to “Do I want it or not” (Fan & Su, 2022).

#### 4.2 Reconstruction of Values in the New Era and the Social Effects of Advertising

Television advertisements based on female stereotypes exacerbate gender tearing. Previous studies have compared the construction of masculinity and femininity in television advertisements, but there is limited research on the anti-gender stereotype endorsement context of male products. Anti-gender stereotypes have received further attention in television advertising research, mainly based on the concept of anti-gender stereotypes, which means that the gender of the advertising spokesperson is opposite to the inherent impression of consumers on the gender attributes of the product. When the gender of the spokesperson is inconsistent with the gender attributes of the product, it will stimulate consumers to have a deeper understanding of the advertisement, thereby improving advertising effectiveness. In the context of anti-gender stereotype endorsements, most studies have focused on the impact of male spokespersons' gender temperament on advertising effectiveness, exploring the impact of this factor on consumer purchasing decisions and behavior.

The use of auditory symbols in TV commercials can see the difficulties faced by anti-gender stereotypes in practical applications, such as the “Guangzhou Houdi” shampoo advertisement for female singer Coco Lee, the “Bubu Gao” music mobile advertisement for Korean actor Song Hye Kyo, and the “Wang Hawthorn” fruit flavored beverage advertisement for singer Gong Linna. These advertisements often use music as the main symbol construction tool, reflecting the influence of consumerism culture on television advertisements and the fact that television advertisements mainly use the strategy of female stereotypes in the construction of female images. For example, the advertising slogan for “Guangzhou Houdi” focuses on “Houdi is good, everyone is really good,” connecting the melody of “Dida Didi” throughout the entire advertising film. The “Bubu Gao” music mobile advertisement covers the entire content by humming, and the “Wangshan Hawthorn” fruit-flavored beverage advertisement is directly adapted from the Buyi ethnic song sung by singer Gong Linna.

In terms of the construction of the social effect of advertising, female singer Coco Li's “Guangzhou Houdi” shampoo advertisement implies social pressure and the pursuit of group identity. This can be interpreted as people wanting to adapt to society's expectations, pursuing resonance with others, and thus obtaining a sense of

satisfaction and happiness. Song Huiqiao conveyed unique values in the “Bu Bu Gao” music mobile advertising, and the advertising producers used this to construct a female image that was different from the local market to attract consumers' attention. Singer Gong Linna's “Hope Hawthorn” fruit-flavored beverage advertisement dares to proclaim anti-gender stereotypes and emphasize the “unique self.” However, the values behind it still face the dilemma of “breaking without standing.” The advertising song, “This is the Unique Self,” is logically shaky and lacks a solid foundation to infer.

### 5. Conclusion

For a long time, gender discrimination in media advertising has attracted attention from the academic community. The statement that “advertising=goods+women” has made television advertising consciously tilt towards a male perspective. This study suggests that television advertising constructs a “discourse field” where women are disadvantaged, and the construction of visual and auditory symbols reflects the communication of advertising values. This study found that as social attitudes change, elite discourse and consumerism jointly influence the expression and presentation of female images in television advertising. The media effect of symbol construction in television advertising is significant, and advertising communication aimed at traffic will ignore the social problems caused by gender tearing. In the new era, advertising urgently needs to complete the reconstruction of values and achieve the social significance of promoting development through advertising communication.

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