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Psychology Research

journal homepage: www.seiofbluemountain.com



Language Sexism in Advertisement From the Perspective of Feminism

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KEYWORDS

Feminism,
Advertisement,
Language sexism

ABSTRACT

Language sexism exists in advertisement from the perspective of feminism and it shows mainly at language style specific to women, word games with sex association and stereotype strengthening of social roles. Language form influences the manners of people's observation towards the world and the thoughts of people. We should be against sexism from language, try to diminish sexism language and establish the language environment of equality for both men and women in order to improve the social status of women.

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1 Introduction

The relationship between language and gender is a very important issue for sociolinguistics. The study not only shows the social status of both men and women from the perspective of language, but also shows the language rules from the perspective of society. Therefore, it provides a new research approach for both social study and linguistic study. At the same time, the relationship between language and gender is also the focus of cognitive linguistics. According to cognitive linguistics, language is motivated and reflects the cognition mode of human beings^[1], so that language must reflect the social relation of men and women. According to Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language determines our thoughts and limits our cognition towards the world. Therefore, we can see the improvement of social status of women can be started from language construction. The article investigates language sexism in advertisement by the stand of feminism with the aim to show the social status of women and probe into the methods to improve the social status of women from language.

2 Feminism and Language Sexism

Feminism refers to the movement and ideology of defending the rights of politics, economic and social equality, including helping women seek the employment and education chances. Feminism maintains and supports women's rights and equal status, gets rid of gender differences and dependency status of women. Feminists hold that society is built on side of men. Since language reflects reality and there is phenomenon of inequality among men and women, this phenomenon must be shown in language. The feminist Robin Lakoff points out that women language mirrors the social status of women^[2].

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Feminists hold that there are a lot of sexism in language. Language sexism refers to sexism towards women by society, especially by men. Men and women are dealt with differently in language. The manifestation of language sexism is shown in many aspects, such as overgeneralization of male language. Men are considered as the prototype of human beings. We use 'man' to refer to all human beings and 'he' to refer to the person with unknown sex or any person. The manifestation of language sexism is also shown in dependence of female language. Women take men language as the standard and take men language as criterion and subject. Female language depends on male language, such as male language is unmarked and female language is suffixed to male counterpart, for example, male-female, host-hostess, and hero-heroine. Female language is often derogated, such as Chinese characters with the female component to express 'prostitute', 'rape' and 'envy'. Feminists support language without sex awareness and support the use of language with two sexes, such as to use 'people' instead of 'man', 'humanity' instead of 'mankind', 'police officer' instead of policeman. At the same time, they wish not to use sex specific language and hope that the change of language use can influence the idea of gender in reality.

3 Manifestations of Language Sexism in Advertisement

Advertisement is a paid mass media communication and a way to control consumer market to get the most benefit by the least pay. Advertisement is an elaborately created image. It often links product with pleasure coming from illusion and thirst and it has the characteristics of publicity, popularity and catering to the public. Sex is the inseparable theme of advertisement and female image shaping is the theme of advertisement design. Although advertisement is asked to try to avoid sexism, a lot of advertisements materialize female, emphasize female stereotype, and pursue beauty economic benefit, thus advertisements transmit unfair recognition and evaluation toward female by presupposition and hypothesis of gender. Most of study about the relationship between sex and advertisement analyzes language sexism in advertisement from scene, visual image, but it ignores the role of language in shaping female image. We think that language can make the theme of advertisement sublime and make advertisement have stronger spreading. Language is the soul of advertisement. Advertisement message is more popular and shows hidden sexism. Therefore, this article probes into sexism from the perspective of language with the aim of completing the study of relationship between gender and advertisement. Language sexism in advertisement is shown in many aspects, but we only talk about three aspects: language style, word play with sex association and strengthening of social role stereotype.

3.1 Specific language style of women

According to feminists, in the men-dominated society, men wish to shape women into the image which satisfies the need of men. They hold that women are on the dependent social status, women's appearance is more important and women should please men. The male chauvinism is shown in many aspects of life, so that advertisement as the important media to reflect and shape culture must reflect sexism. For example, advertisement propagates that women should be slim, soft and good wives and mothers. Sexism in language is that women have specific language style, that is, language styles of advertisement are different for the different audience of advertisement.

Language style of women comes from expectation, limitation and stereotype to them from other people. Advertisements have different language styles for men and women product audience. According to Ivy and Backlund, men in advertisement are often described as professional, knowledgeable, jock, which can perform in all sports and handy man who can fix anything^[3]. The products with men as main consumers are such as suit, tobacco and car. Such advertisements often give prominence to men's manliness, such as bravery, wildness and success by using the domineering words, such 'success', 'the world' and 'leader'. For examples:

To the man like you—K-boxing;
Kaikai shirt, leader style—Kaikai shirt;
Handsome, Italian wildness, cool, and graceful!—Italian Modern Clothing;
Our land is rich in beauty, and the hero never fails—Maotai Group;
Be in good enough friendship; drink long enough wine—Maotai wine;
Too generous to drink out—Bandaojing wine;
Absolutely men's taste—Stone Lion Tobacco;
Lead the times and drive the future—Benz car;
Endless struggle—men's shirt of Septwolves.

By contrast with men's powerfulness, the associative meaning of women is soft, considerate and beautiful. Women are described as being separable from society, and being attentive to appearance. They wear underwear instead of professional suit. Therefore, the main products aiming for women are such as cosmetics, toiletry, underwear, cleaning products highlight women's feature in advertisement message. The message is beautiful in wording, and makes use of figurative speech, such as metaphor and hyperbole.

For examples:
Put on Awakening Lion, tender and soft as water!—Awakening Lion wool dress;
Curvaceous and dignified as the daughter of humble family—Indian silk suit;
Tender skin is from Ponds—Pond's skincare product;
Skin is fresh and alive as roses—Lancôme day cream;

Skin is like eggs without shells—Olay facial mask;

Twenty years old this year and eighteen next year—Baili beauty soap.

In summary, advertisements with women as audience are to establish the image and emotion relationship between potential female buyers and products by language, encourage women to perfect the propagated elegant female image by buying products and advocate that women's values lie in beauty and youth. The so-called excellent qualities are imposed on women and become chains to limit women. And the more terrible thing is that women satisfy the needs of society voluntarily under such propaganda. Men's beauty appreciation is internalized into women's value and women have not realized language sexism in these advertisements.

3.2 Wordplay of sex association

According to advertising law, advertisement should not impede the public order and violate good prevailing customs. Female image in advertisement should be healthy and positive. Advertisement should not be in vulgar taste and damage female image. But a lot of advertisements exploit loopholes and there appear sex appeal. That is, advertisement produces sex association by wordplay—figurative speech, which includes pun, parody, metaphor, etc. By figurative speech, there arises language ambiguity to create sex association, thus the same feeling appears and attract the attention of consumers. This kind of advertisement takes women as men's object of appreciation of beauty and goal of lust. Women descend to sex tool or commodity.

One kind of sex association can be seen in breast enlargement and underwear advertisement in which women's part of body is materialized and women are evaluated as perfect women from men's angle. The form of breast becomes the sole factor to determine the value of women. The figurative speech parody is often used as wordplay in this kind of advertisement by coining words or expressions at random through familiar words and expressions. Pun is another common language device to produce ambiguity of sex association. For examples:

To be women is very good (Women should have high breast)—Underwear advertisement;

From now on, you will not be controlled by men's hand—Breast enlarging advertisement;

Everything can be bigger—Breast enlarging advertisement;

You cannot keep your head up if you cannot stretch your chest—Breast enlarging advertisement.

Besides breast enlarging and underwear advertisements which have close relationship with sex, sex hint advertisements can be used in other products. One very vulgar advertisement is 'cool air' chewing gum. In this advertisement, the picture of a beautiful girl and a handsome boy and sweet off-screen voice 'Cool Air chewing gum makes you feel wave after wave' produce a strong sex association. The wave is connected with unrestrained women by metaphor. The connection between them is the huge prejudice towards women. Unrestraint is the requirement of men and at the same time unrestraint is blamed on women.

Another chewing gum advertisement which makes use of homophone to create sex association is also controversial. In the advertisement, a girl asks with bad smile, "Do you want flavor of cleaning mouth?" When the boy understands 'cleaning mouth' as 'kissing mouth', she corrects that 'cleaning mouth' is the flavor of chewing gum. The girl is portrayed as a teasing image, thus women are in the image of arch-criminal of bad relation between two sexes. At the same time, women are depicted as weak image in which women are dependent on men. For example, in one advertisement of advertising board contract, there is a sexy white-dressed girl and said, "Waiting for you to keep". 'Bao' in Chinese is ambiguous, which can be 'keep contract' or 'keep as a mistress of a man'. Women have been materialized, not only as advertising board, but also washing powder, such as Eagle brand advertisement message: "Have you soaked it? Yes. Have you drifted it? Yes." But both 'pao' and 'Piao' are ambiguous. They not only mean 'soak' and 'drift' respectively, but also mean 'chase after girl' and 'go whoring', thus there appear sex association.

3.3 Strengthening of social role stereotype

The subordinate status of women is the idea strengthened again and again by advertisement. It is shown in household labor division and social status that men are superior to women. Women are subordinate to men and women take men as the most important. Only when men are good, then women are good, so that in the kidney medicine Hui ren Shenbao, a woman says, "He is good and I am good too." Wives are the private items of husbands and wives can be sent to others. Taitai Oral Liquid advertisement advocates "give you a new 'Taitai (wife) every day". Because of weak position of women, women should be given "the most tender care" (cosmetic and underwear ads).

Women also have another important advertisement image: good wife and mother. Women's status in family and marriage is doing housework, help husbands and teach children. Some advertisements arrange women in the kitchen or restroom, implying that women should do housework in family, just as in Fangtai kitchen ventilator ad, a beautiful housewife says happily "no fume smell but women's charming", which shows that women are very willing work in the kitchen. A full-automatic washing machine has the advertisement message "She works and you have a rest". And wash care information lists some notice for washing this kind of clothing material, such as no machine wash, no tumbling, inside out, etc. Finally there is more: if you cannot do that according to the requirements listed above, give it to your women because this is her job. And also some advertisements openly claim that women will be wiser if they work more in kitchen.

The idea that men are breadwinner outside and women are housewives inside is deep-rooted in China. Even women themselves have not realized sexism in this kind of advertisement. Bubugao learning machine advertisement emphasizes the role of mother in education of children. If you use the learning machine, "mother would not worry about my study any more". As feminists, we cannot help asking, why not father worry about the study of children? This kind of advertisement with good wife and mother shows as

follows:

To be gold-medal mother by using healthy oil—Fortune oil;

The love given to mother—Washing machine;

Good wife and mother—Washing machine;

One in the morning and one in the evening, so that I have a good appetite for what mother cooks for me—Oral liquid.

4 Conclusion

The role of advertisement is beyond selling product because it influences our culture and value. From the perspective of feminists, we can see that advertisement tells us women should be younger, slimmer and more beautiful. They should have beautiful hair, cook delicious food and do some cleaning. But these requirements are imposed on women, yet they seldom realize the inequality. When prejudice becomes a habit and a matter of course, it would be horrible. If there is no awakening, there is no resistance and change. Elimination of sexism should start from change of thoughts, but feminism agrees with Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language influences the mode of people in observing the world and their thoughts. Therefore we should fight against sexism from language and try to eliminate language sexism and establish a language environment in which men and women are equal. One strategy to get rid of language sexism is to ask more people to become feminists and refuse androcentrism, so that more people supervise advertisement effectively. Secondly, we should get rid of advertisement with language sexism and adopt neutral and pure language. In the advertisement, we should publicize independence of women and form a good female image.

Acknowledgement:

This article is funded by Project of Shandong University Core Teachers Visiting Abroad.

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