

From Semiotic Perspective: Male Endorsements in Cosmetic Advertising

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Keywords: celebrity endorsements, advertising, semiotic triangle, gender

Abstract: Ambassadors in cosmetic advertising was traditionally regarded as females' arena. However, facing with the need to constantly find new growth drivers, cosmetic brands increasingly use male as advertising ambassador. This phenomenon is popular in Asian countries recently. Taking four male advertising of Estée Lauder as examples, this article uses semiotic approach to detect the motivation behind the male ambassadors' advertising. The results show that the rising social status in discourse for women and the acquiescence of men as the first sex makes the reverse endorser advertisements of women's cosmetics becoming possible.

1. Introduction

It has been widely accepted that cosmetics advertisers prefer female ambassadors to promote their products and play the role as decorative models, as endorsers for the brands, and as a portrayal of ideal self-concept that the brand wants to attach to the brand image (Kim, Han, Kim, & Paramita, 2013)[1]. However, with the continuous development of the commodity economy, the marketing strategies of brands have also become diversified. In recent years, the Chinese cosmetics industry has shown a new trend of abandoning traditional advertising strategies by using male as the cosmetics endorsers. This phenomenon has caused the author to think deeply. It is significant to comprehend the motivation behind the new phenomenon for both market and academe. While this phenomenon is popular in Asian countries recently, very little observation and research has focused on this new phenomenon. Some studies of male endorsement advertising have tended to focus on the field of gender and cultural exports. In 2020, Li situated in the contemporary Chinese market and examines the so-called "Nan Se consumption (男色消费)" culture and argue that the shift from "male gaze" to "female gaze" appear to be revolutionary in terms of post-feminism [2]. Moreover, some recent scholars give priority on analyzing whether using of male ambassadors can be significant and successful as Korea for other Asian regions (Kim, Han, Kim, & Paramita, 2013)[3]. However, there is not enough researches on this specific phenomenon in the cosmetics advertisement. Even no research from semiotic perspective of advertising approach to answer these

questions: What is the motivation behind this phenomenon? Why are male endorsers irreplaceable? How these things can stand for these referents in Chinese social environment? To fill the research gap, this article examined the motivation of male endorsement advertising from a semiotic perspective.

This article will use the Peirce's semiotic triangle to study the symbols and deep meaning behind male endorsed advertisements. and using Estee Lauder as a case study, because in the past two years Estee Lauder has used four male endorsers and achieved amazing sales in the market, which is undoubtedly successful in advertising sales. For instance, the sale of the lipstick endorsed by Xiao Zhan was over 40 million in one hour in China Singles' Day. This article hopes to dig out the deep understanding of gender in contemporary Chinese society through the process of interpreting these four advertisements, so as to make theoretical references and suggestions for the diversified development of advertising

2. Literature Review

In recent years, commercial brands have become increasingly competitive in most market segments, which makes advertising an important way to highlight product features to consumers. (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010)[4]. Advertising is becoming one of the most important elements of the marketing mix (Sethuraman, Tellis, & Briesch, 2011)[5]. Most scholars using content analysis to study advertising, Advertising context depends on visual imagery, colors, movements, music and other non-verbal elements to convey cultural values in specific nations (Alozie, 2010)[6]. Morgenstern et al (2015) on the basis of content analysis, used latent class analysis (LCA) to define content cluster themes and helping brands to exploit these themes[7]. Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes (2006) use ethnology and psychoanalysis to analyse advertising[8]. This makes the reticence of consumers easier to understand and aids the study of advertising text in relation to cultural context.

Advertisement is a concentrated embodiment of semiotics. It conveys information through a few minutes of advertisement presentation and penetrates people's hearts through symbols. Advertising semiotics focuses on the understanding of symbols and their value increment in communication, through social emotions and personal experiences to illustrate the change of interpretation of advertising in a particular society (He & Shao, 2018)[9]. Saussure emphasis on language as a system of signs and explained that signs consist of two parts: the signifier and the signified. On the basis of Saussure's theory, Peirce was primarily interested in the process of semiotics and his semiotic paradigm and discourse can be understood through the concepts of sign, interpretation and referent (Mingers and Willcocks, 2014)[10]. He & Shao (2018)[11] point out and highlight that interpretation is the true subject of semiotics. according to Alozie (2010), advertising has been described as a form of propaganda because of its persuasive ability to influence consumers to develop an interest in a good or service, consequently influencing them to purchase that good or service that they do not necessarily need and this ability comes from interpretation[12].

In order to better study the construction process of advertising symbols in a particular society, in this paper I introduce the semiotic triangle to study the interpretation of endorser advertising. Peirce (1960) introduced three concepts of semiotic triangle: sign, thought and reference. A sign can be defined as the word that calls up the referent through the mental processes. A thought can be defined as the realm of memories of past experiences and scenes. A referent can be defined as an object, which can be perceived as an impression in the field of thought. It is noteworthy that sign can stand for referent but not directly, sign realizes the meaning of referent through the association of audience in different social environments [13].

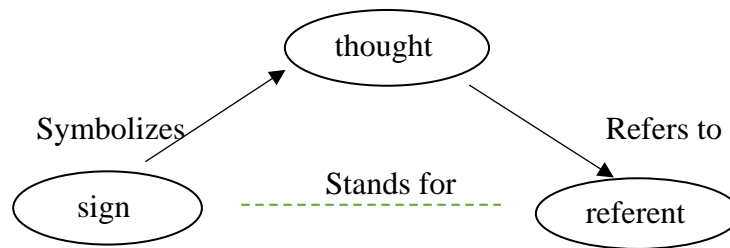


Figure 1.

On the basis of Peirce's theory of signs, Glazer (2017) argues that expressions of emotion refer to emotions in none of those ways --e.g. cries, laughs, and scowls [14]. On the contrary, they refer to their objects by showing them, or by perceiving them. His analysis of emotional expression contends a public comprehension of Peirce's semiotic triangle, he supports that it is ultimately consistent with Peirce's theory on signification, emotion, and perception. Moreover, Ding (2016) modifies Peirce's views from the angle of sign emergence and evolution and stresses the significance of comprehending sign transformations [15].

Advertising as a mass interactive media, interactivity is one of the most significant characteristics. Pierce symbol triangle provides a complete theoretical framework to explain the dynamic linkage effect of advertising. In the process of interpretation, the referent, sign emphasizes the essential key role of human thought in constructing the connection between the sign and referent. Symbol triangle highlights the development of how users comprehend (Dong et al., 2014)[16]. Because of these advantages of the symbol triangle, this paper analyzes the meaning behind the advertisement of the new spokesman advertising and the process of comprehension in Chinese society through the symbol triangle from Pierce.

3. Semiotic Triangle for Advertisements


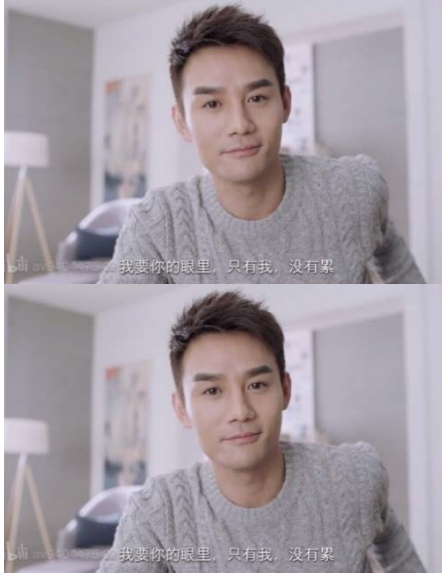
Case study selection has been driven by product type and brand popularity. Regarding to the 'the most popular brand in China 2019', Estee Lauder has been found to be at the top of the ranking. in order to select the appropriate and representative male endorsers ads, this paper chose 4 representative product advertisements of Estée lauder, which are well-known and have created high sales as case study. Generally, these can be divided to two lines: showing sexual power or establishing new male image.

Personality of ambassador is essential for exerting a subtle influence on understanding a media sign. This advertisement invites Wang Kai to be the product advertisement ambassador, which is very consistent with script setting. Wang kai is famous for his hit TV series in recent years. He is always demonstrating in front of the screen with his warm, sunny and handsome screen image. Moreover, the hashtag (i.e. #Wang Kai &long fingers #Wang Kai &long legs) were trending on the Weibo frequently. The young man portrayed in the advertisement appears to be physically fit but not emphasized on muscular physique. Sweet smile with soft eyes, these characteristics contribute the most popular new male image in China recent years called 'warm men'.

The composition and shooting technique of advertising is the bridge to refer sign to referent. The gentle and approachable young male ambassador is dressed in a milk white sweater and the entire video presents with soft light and low saturation picture present feature an irresistible rendering of "romantic". This advertising was shot in a first-person perspective, using the clever approach to

strengthen the bond between protagonist and audiences and the sense of substitution. when the protagonist touched the camera looks like he is touching the audience’s head and hands. After interacting with the camera, protagonist grin and clings. The relationship between male ambassador and audiences seems to be intimate—in Chinese culture, expressing intimacy is implicit and vague. This series of intimate actions directly caused the public thought about ‘love’.





Table 1: The line demonstrates sexual power: Wang Kai.

Variables category	Variables name	Example
Sign	Screen capture	 <p>‘girlfriend perspective’</p> <p>‘scream tough’</p>
	Lines capture	 <p>‘I need you focus on me not on being tired’</p>
	Celebrity endorsements	Gentle, approachable, elegant
Reference	Signification & brand motivation	Product: Repairing, smooth, re-invigorate Advertising: love and caring

Thought	comments + forwarding + praises=thought	
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(<http://anreyemask2.esteelauderclub.cn/container.html>)

Table 2: The line demonstrates sexual power: Xiao Zhan.

Variables category	Variables name	Example
Sign	Scenario analysis	 <p>scene setting: employment interview [rational]'</p>
		
		 <p>turning point: using lipstick (before & after)</p>
		 <p>plot development: Be attracted [irrational]</p>
	Lines capture	'confidence breeds beauty' 'I love my femininity as much as I rely on my toughness'
	Celebrity endorsements	Fresh, handsome, popular, idol
Reference	Signification & brand motivation	Product: charming, seductive Advertising: sexual fascination
Thought	comments + forwarding + praises=thought	

(http://m.iqiyi.com/v_19rveeu110.html?social_platform=link&p1=2_22_221&_frd=3RspCrwsATom11SJmvDxXCIJzB86ctqRDJaLWNJF%2BnJdnQKBx0uDg1A5scbbGLnwArx42kpLXkEhfLb72JaWp81o4GH0vSEzf%2FzI%2BGcsHLE%3D)

Line is the most intuitive sign in advertisement, which can be interpreted in different social environments. 'I am worried that she is too busy to care about herself' this statement illustrates the meaning of caring, deeply penetrating into audiences' hearts, facing with the pressures from workplace urban females eagerness for understanding and caring. 'I need you focus on me not on being tired' this line implies that in China, the rights still belong to men, this kind of discourse makes the concept of women's potential inequality. Advertising with gender equality in China has been controversial. Although it does exist, majority of audiences show high interest about the screen portrayal of the "domineer and gentle boyfriend" image. Through some comments and bullet screen display on several well-known video broadcasting platforms in China, such as 'girlfriend perspective', 'Mr. Dreamy is always right', 'so sweet to communicate with my prince charming'... it is obvious that most of Chinese female audiences have a sense of identity and insensitivity to the existence paradigm of "male chauvinism".


To conclude, although the primary aim of symbols in the advertisement is not to emphasize the high product quality, it demonstrates the male ambassador owns sexual power to prevail upon purchasing. Substantially, this advertising seems to deliver a message that if these urban females use Estée lauder's eye cream, they can get rid of the stress of work and release themselves. Estée lauder's eye cream brings warmth and comfort to the miserable work life, just like love does.

Noted that this advertising combines plot with characteristic of product, utilizing the reversal process to blowup the charisma of the product. the opening structure parable may be set as a hint of "rational" behind the advertising, the heroine was diffident, nervous and self-doubting before she uses the product, however she built strong confidence and determination after using it. Under such a rational atmosphere, the protagonist is still attracted by the confident heroine wearing lipstick. The collision between irrational and rational highlights the extremely attractive characteristics of this product.

Cosmetics advertising in China are still continuing to reinforce women's crisis awareness and anxiety about themselves. Before diving into advertising analysis, it is worthwhile to point out that Since commercial advertising is always following the priority to attract potential consumers, the femininity and masculinity shown in ads must be considered to be the most accessible to the target audience and therefore highly stereotyped (Motschenbacher,2009)[17]. To be more specific, the more value the advertisement generates, the more the audience identifies with the femininity of the advertisement created. 'Confidence breeds beauty' defines beauty. Using Estée Lauder lipstick will make a woman instantly recharge her batteries and rebuild confidence and glow. In other words, Women who wear lipstick are confident that is the reason why they are beautiful. Demonstrating the sign of plot change to visually stand for the referent of 'powerful and confident'. For its part, the Estée lauder ad 'I love my femininity as much as I rely on my toughness' implied the way how Chinese understanding of femininity. In the term of feminine, different social environments create different expectations. Advertising is not only a means of commercial marketing, but also a cultural mapping. This advertising constructs an antecedent that women who wear lipstick are full of feminine delicacy, the context there is that lipstick (sign) standing for femininity and toughness (referent). Gender construction is effective only if the public recognize and interpret it as intelligibly gendered. Noted that 'lipstick refers to femininity and toughness' might have a negative insinuation on women's subjective image of their own femininity, which they may see as inadequate if they do not conform to commercially constructed bodies. There is no doubt that it narrows the interpretation of diversification of femininity and also reflects the phenomenon of

gender stereotypes in Chinese society. Masculinity and femininity are not the praise of beauty, but the oppression of colorful characteristic and the obstacle to diversified development.

Table 3: The line demonstrates new male image: Li Xian.

Variables category	Variables name	Example
Sign	Shooting scale	 <p>‘wide shot’</p> <p>‘medium shot’</p> <p>‘close shot’</p>
	Lines capture	<p>‘I never stop, one step at a time’</p> <p>‘Refuse impetuosity, Find yourself’</p> <p>‘Mentality cannot be impetuous, the same with your skin.’</p>
	Celebrity endorsements	active, popular, energetic actor
Reference	Signification & brand motivation	<p>Product: moisturizing, durable</p> <p>Advertising: new male image: appearance should be valued and refuse impetuosity</p>
Thought	comments + forwarding + praises=thought	

(<https://www.weibo.com/tv/v/I7D4e9Y85?fid=1034:4418184644916804>)

In recent years, the ‘starlet’ economy has been thriving in China. The larger backup forces are, the more outstanding capacity there is to marketing selling. Xiao Zhan is a popular fresh idol in the recent year, with a huge fan base and concentrated hot topics. A combination of advertising plot and popular idols conveys the implication that using the lipstick Xiao Zhan selected for you, to be the woman who fascinated him, there is no doubt that it likely hit the stimulant to his fans, which will directly stimulate the product’s sale. To conclude, the combination of male ambassador’s display of sexual power and fan economy has become a new trend of female cosmetics advertising in China.

Sales are boosted by reinforcing women's own anxieties and enticing fans to pay for their idols' charisma.

It is interesting to find that Product advertisements of different genders' endorsers differ greatly in the choice of shooting scale. Women's cosmetics advertisements mostly use close shots and close-ups to render the characteristics and advantages of the product. The close shot is a picture that shows the part or part of the character above the chest, and the content is more focused on the theme. It can clearly show the details of the character or object and supplement the parts that cannot be brought to the big scene (long shot, full shot). The close-up generally represents the head of a celebrity endorser above the neck or a detailed picture of some subjects. It is mostly used to show the most important and prominent details of the subject (person or object), but also used to render the strongest atmosphere and mood. It plays the role of emphasizing, highlighting and exaggerating the importance. The concept of the environment is almost ignored, and only the part of the subject is concerned. Close shots and close-ups are often used in women's cosmetics advertisements, such as delicate skin, rosy cheeks, charming eyes, long eyelashes and so on, in order to highlight the details and advantages of the product. Compared to the mainstream female cosmetics advertisements on the market, in this article, the priority of male endorser advertisements in the choice of shooting scale is given to using long and medium shots to render character images rather than product details.

The long shot lens generally refers to the lens with the most relaxing field of view, which is used to show the overall environment. Many videos like to place this kind of lens at the beginning of the film to establish the overall environment concept and the tone, providing a reference for the closer shot. So, this kind of lens is also often called establishing shots. This advertisement uses a few frames at the beginning of the film to build the environment of 'deserts' (sign). The vast yellow sand represents the background of 'dry' (referent). The background shots for the whole advertisement are established to prove the features of moisturizing and fitting promoted by the product. The voice-over 'I never stop, one step at a time' builds up the image that men still work hard even in the harsh environment, in line with the expectations of Chinese society for men.

Noted that this advertisement uses medium shots rather than close-ups to propagandize products. Medium shot is a more functional lens, which is often used as an illustrative lens. Under the medium shot, the character's physical movements, facial expressions and clothes are clearly displayed, simultaneously taking care of the environment and not disconnected from the surrounding environment, so this shooting scale is very good at expressing the identity of the characters, the communication between the characters and relationships. The male leading role wears a primary color jacket, with a clean face, a neat hairstyle, and monologue of 'refuse impetuosity, find yourself', building the image of the "sunshine boy" that Chinese people look forward to. Although the endorsed product is a liquid foundation for women in the traditional Chinese impression, it has not used women's expression techniques to display the product. Instead, it uses 'Mentality cannot be impetuous, the same with your skin.' to build a new male image that men should also pay attention to appearance and create a clean and matching appearance. Advertising builds a new male identity to win audience recognition, rather than simply focusing on product functionality through close-ups.

Table 4: The line demonstrates new male image: Chen Kun.

Variables category	Variables name	Example
Sign	Celebrity endorsements	Accomplished actor, philanthropist, millionaire

	Lines capture	
Reference	Signification & brand motivation	Product: Advertising: new male image
Thought	comments + forwarding + praises=thought	

(https://m.sohu.com/a/252323366_100071077)

To some extent, this reverse endorser advertisement has achieved a success in China, which not only opened up the male make-up market, but also contributed a new explanation for the diversification of male images. According to data from Weibo, Chinese social media, this advertisement was reshared over 1 million, with 658,000 likes and 86,000 comments. "Men can also use foundation" "Li Xian is senior" and other comments with more likes and barrage excerpts can reflect the Chinese tolerance and recognition to this new type of male image.

This Estée Lauder advertisement played down the symbol of "gender" when designing the plot direction and shooting but chose the symbol of "class" to resonate with the audience. The choice of endorsers of Estée Lauder's skincare advertisements is different from the past. Most cosmetics advertisements will choose the spokesperson with high popularity and good image at the time, while the skincare product line will mostly choose the well-known and well-established stars in this industry. Chen Kun, a mainland Chinese actor, entered the film industry in 1999. After his debut, he

won many awards such as the Outstanding Actor Award of Huabiao Film Award and the Best Actor Award of the Popular Film Hundred Flowers Award. As the Chinese ambassador of UNICEF, he has donated to charity projects such as Da Ai Qing Chen, Caring for Veterans, and China Rural Kids Care. In 2011, he launched the spiritual public welfare project "Power to go" and was awarded the "Edelweiss" Medal by the Austrian Embassy in November 2013. In 2011, he published a personal essay collection "Suddenly Come to Tibet", which exceeded 300,000 copies, and was selected into the seventh Writers Rich List.

In 2018, he was included in the "TOP30 China Charity Celebrity List 2017". In the same year, Chen Kun participated in the Second National Congress of China Literary and Art Volunteers' Association and was elected as a director. In summary, Chen Kun's position in the industry is self-evident. At the same time, with his handsome and ageless appearance, he has been labeled as "the evergreen tree in the entertainment industry" and "immortal god" by the audience. Compared with other new stars in the entertainment industry, Chen Kun is quite influential in terms of reputation, international influence and wealth status. It is in line with the sense of "class" outlined in this advertisement. The advertisement constructs the character's "hierarchy" through the high-quality suits and white home clothes, the outdoor balcony of high buildings, and yoga as a leisure method. At the same time, handsome appearance and elegant temperament will draw the audience's attention from gender back to the high-end product, constructing the meaning of "use Estée Lauder Advanced Night Repair and feel Chen Kun's exquisite life".

This advertisement resonates through an analogous narrative. At the beginning of the advertisement, Chen Kun walked on the dim street, with a monologue "as an actor, playing others' roles well, you must forget yourself." Although narrative is based on the identity symbol of an actor, it reflects the identity symbol of "employees" in the workplace; "Living in roles, inhabiting roles deeply, exhausting the energy" also means that the hardships and difficulty resonate with office workers; at night, "Every night is a self-cultivation and the spiritual power will be awakened" imply that people take off the disguise of "performance" and enter the stage of self-relaxation. The entire advertisement did not take the time to describe the product's functional characteristics and promotional selling points. Instead, it created a classy sense of "refined life" to attract audiences who want to enter or be in that class. Through "power of night" and "Self-cultivation", it publicizes the power of ANR for night repair.

To sum up, when designing the script of the reverse endorsers' cosmetics advertisement, in addition to attracting the audience through sexual power, it can also open up the market by building a new male image. At the same time, it can also stimulate the consumption by diluting gender differences and building the characteristics of the target consumers.

In conclusion, Wang Kai's eye cream advertisement uses the intimacy in the picture to refer to love in the context of subtle Eastern society. Its essence is to sell love; Xiao Zhan's lipstick advertisement emphasizes femininity and self-confidence with sexual appeal, which takes aim at women's anxiety; Li Xian's foundation advertisement implies the pursuit of exquisite appearance with appropriate makeup in order to create a new type of the male image; Chen Kun's skincare advertisement breaks through the gender dimension and utilize quality life as the standard of the elite, which is designed to market a high-quality lifestyle.

4. Conclusions

From these four advertisements, it is not difficult to see that there is still a general acquiescence of the first sex as male in contemporary China. Whether in traditional advertisements for male or new-type advertisements for female, there is still a potential male chauvinism in China. Even the "sweet

guy" role that caters to women's tastes also is performed through male chauvinism to show sexual charm for winning more fans, which also reflects the compromise in the subconscious of contemporary Chinese women on the other side; not only that, but there is still a "male = elite" paradigm in the Chinese social context. Even if the status of women is gradually rising, it is also limited by gender expectations and stereotypes of society for females. China still has room for improvement on the road calling for gender equality; furthermore, the mainstream aesthetics depends on the masculinism. The advertising phenomenon that equates women's beauty with attraction to men which causes women's anxiety is endless, and the gender inequality is reflected behind it.

However, with the continuous development of sexual egalitarianism, gender stereotypes in contemporary Chinese society have changed significantly. In contemporary Chinese society, males also have the possibility of being materialized. From the perspective of dialectics, the phenomenon that the advertising industry causes women's anxiety is also materializing men as creatures focusing on sex-appeal; at the same time, in the contemporary era when little fresh meat is in vogue (little fresh meat generally refers to handsome men between the ages of 14-25), the public aesthetic gradually appears to cater to female tastes, which is also expression of the rising social status and more power of discourse for contemporary Chinese women; besides, the attitude of society in china to the new male image is optimistic, which is a good trend for the development of sexual egalitarianism, and also an expansion of developing diversified personality.

In summary, the rising social status and more power of discourse for women is gravity, and the acquiescence of men as the first sex is thrust. Under the traction from them, the attempt of reverse endorser advertisements of women's cosmetics has been possible, which is the result of the combined effect of the two forces mentioned above.

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