Is woman or liquor being sold? – Gender analysis of alcohol TV commercials in Hong Kong

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Recent studies suggested that with an increasing number of campaigns promoting the idea of gender equality, people’s awareness about gender issues is generally raised. However gender discrimination is still an important issue in Hong Kong. By analyzing three alcohol advertisements broadcasted in Hong Kong using a Critical Discourse Analysis Approach, this paper aims at further explaining the ways in which men and women are portrayed in these commercials, and critically discussing the underlying gender ideologies. This paper also investigates people’s awareness about gender issues by conducting interviews with ten men and women and collecting their opinions about the three TV commercials. It is concluded that men are usually portrayed as “tough” and “strong” while women are generally portrayed as “seductive”, “physically attractive”, sometimes “smart” and “cooperative”. These stereotypes are mostly naturalized, thus the audience seldom questions them.
1. Introduction

Gender differences between men and women are based on social but not biological differences (Monash University, 2009). In patriarchal societies like Hong Kong, there are different expectations about men and women. Men are supposed to act in masculine ways and women are supposed to act in feminine ways. Men and women are culturally assumed to uphold two extreme sets of traits. On the one hand, men are often viewed as the dominant group which can regulate norms and rules. They uphold positive traits such as strong, active, independent and rational. On the other hand, women are often seen as the suppressed group that embodies a range of negative traits such as passive, weak, dependent and emotional. These roles are not innate and natural, but are socially constructed and constantly reinforced, for example by, family, schooling, peer group and mass media. Mass media, in particular, has been said to “provide us with models for behavior by reflecting and reinforcing existing beliefs and attitudes” (Media Awareness Network, 2009).

Some researchers suggested that with an increasing number of campaigns promoting the idea of gender equality, people’s awareness about gender issues is generally raised. It is even believed that “sexual inequalities no longer exist in Hong Kong” (Women and Media Concern Group, 1992: 183). Nonetheless, some researchers suggested that “the advancements for women have primarily taken place on the surface, and that gender discrimination is still an important issue in Hong Kong affecting various levels of society” (Kang & Schnurr, 2009: 2). In this study, I am going to investigate the question of whether the increasing public awareness about gender issue is shown when people are exposed to (sexist) advertisements.

This paper aims at discussing how men and women are portrayed in alcohol TV commercials (also “TV ads”) in Hong Kong. A particular focus is on exploring the underlying gender ideologies. By analyzing the visual and audio elements of three alcohol ads using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, I hope to gain a better understanding of how men and women are portrayed and hence what gender ideologies are reinforced.

White (1990) suggested five characteristics which could generally be found in sexist advertisements. They are superiority, dismemberment, clowning, canting and dominance. “Superiority” means that the relative size, attention and positioning of
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male and female characters could give hints to the audience as to which characters are more superior. “Dismemberment” means that the body parts of women are being gazed at separately while nobody would care about the emotion or mind of the women. “Clowning” means that women are portrayed as clowns who behave innocently like a child. “Canting” means that the bending of the body parts could show a sense of weakness and submissiveness. “Dominance” means that some dominating ideas are glorified in the ads. These five characteristics of gender ads will be helpful in analyzing alcohol TV ads in Hong Kong.

2. Framework

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966: 151) “every individual is born into not only an objective social structure but also an objective social world within which he [sic] encounters the significant others who are in charge of his socialization”. In other words, every person is born in a world which is objectively present, but the knowledge that the person gains and his/her perceptions of the world are socially constructed. For example, a person knows that performing a certain kind of action is considered as “girlish” because of the social construction of what is considered as “girlish” but not because of his/her innate ability. There are different agents which transmit these socially constructed ideas to a person, for instance, family, schooling, peer group, mass media. These ideas are known as “ideologies”. “Ideology” refers to “a coherent set of beliefs and values which dominate in a society. It is concerned with social and power relationships between different groups” (Burton, 2005: 351). It is suggested that the dominant groups are more powerful than the subordinate groups to produce and reinforce the assumptions about social roles in the society. “Ideology becomes ‘the truth’ and ‘common sense’ through a process of naturalization.” (Burton, 2005: 351) The concepts of “ideologies” and “naturalization” are related to the notion of “Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)” which is discussed below.

CDA is “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (van Dijk, 2001: 352). The purpose of CDA is “to show how discourse in its first sense (language in use) also functions as discourse in its second sense (a form of social practice that ‘constructs the objects of which it purports to speak’)” (Cameron, 2001: 123). Ideologies are usually “naturalized” while “naturalization obscures the fact that ‘the way things are’ is not
inevitable or unchangeable” (Cameron, 2001: 123). The use of CDA can help us to critically analyze the “natural” discourses and to dig out the underlying ideologies of media texts as well as the power relationship beneath discourses. In this study, the portrayals of men and women in three alcohol advertisements are analyzed and the ideologies which influence and shape these portrayals are discussed. Furthermore, this will provide us with some insights into how and what kinds of gender ideologies are circulating in Hong Kong society.

3. Methodology

San Miguel, Carlsberg and Blue Girl are three of the most popular beer brands in Hong Kong. In order to study the ideologies behind the alcohol TV commercials in Hong Kong, the TV ads launched by these three brands in 2008 are selected for analysis here with the approach of CDA.

These alcohol ads were also shown to five men and five women whose age range was from 18-24. Subjects were asked to use an adjective to describe each ad. Then, I asked them to indicate whether they liked these ads or not, and also to give reasons for their choice. To avoid bias, I did not tell the respondents that the study conducted was about gender stereotypes in TV ads. I wanted to collect some instant responses but not some decorated answers. By studying their responses, I wanted to gain some insights into youngsters’ awareness about the gender roles presented in the alcohol ads as well as their awareness about gendered ideologies circulated by mass media.

4. Contents of advertisements and discussions

In this section, the contents of the TV ads of San Miguel, Carlsberg and Blue Girl are introduced. The storylines of the advertisements and other effects/elements are also mentioned with the latter put into brackets.
4.1 San Miguel TV Ad

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYQoUoHc4pw)

4.1.1 Contents

(Setting: a bar)

(Five bottles of San Miguel are shown. Manny Pacquiao, the current World Boxing Council Lightweight Champion appears.)

A waitress is holding some bottles of San Miguel on a tray heading towards Manny Pacquiao. A group of women wearing evening gowns enter the bar. One of the women orders some bottles of San Miguel. The bartender shakes his head and tells the woman that there is not a single bottle left. Jet Li, a world known Chinese martial artist, holding a bottle of San Miguel notices that the woman cannot get what she wants. Jet runs and somersaults in order to get some bottles of San Miguel from the waitress’s tray for the woman. He puts a flower on the tray as he takes the liquor.

(Camera focuses on the waitress’s tray which is close to her breast)

The woman, who finally gets the liquor, leans towards Jet and says: “你身手好得喎” (“You are good and skilful.”). Jet says: “都會佢做到嘅” (“San Miguel is better than I am”) The other women also come close to Jet.

(The words “醇厚口味 友誼由此而起 一齊來生力” meaning “friendship starts with good beer, let’s have San Miguel together” are shown. A sign of a man performing martial arts, a bottle of San Miguel and the website of San Miguel appear.)

4.1.2 Portrayal of men

In this ad, men are portrayed as strong, clever and charming. These positive portrayals give us clues on the existence of ideologies about masculine roles in our society according to which men are usually expected to be strong, active and dominant.

The male characters in this ad are Manny Pacquiao and Jet Li. They are good at boxing and kung fu respectively. People can easily relate them with the ideas of “tough” and “strong”. It seems very natural to portray men as “tough” and “strong”.


Yet, these images of men are stereotypical which coincide with the social expectations about men’s behaviors. When the liquor is sold out, Jet tries a clever way of getting some bottles for the woman. This seems to suggest that men are the ones who are clever and innovative when it comes to solving problems. At the end of the ad, there are some women approaching Jet after he has solved the beer problem for them. This image suggests that such a clever and strong guy like Jet is the ideal man who is also charming and attractive to the women.

The portrayals mentioned above contribute to form a masculine identity which is known as “a Jock”. According to the Media Awareness Network (2009), “the jock wins the approval of other men and the adoration of women by demonstrating his power and strength”. In this ad, Jet demonstrates his power and talent to solve the problem. He becomes popular among women in the end. Thus, it is interpreted that Jet is portrayed as “the Jock” in this ad.

4.1.3 Portrayal of women

A “Party Girl” is sexy, glamorous and is the centre of attention in a party (Media Awareness Network, 2009). In this ad, the woman who is helped by Jet wears sexy evening gowns. She is gorgeous and can successfully draw men’s attention in a bar to herself. In these aspects, the woman in the ad could therefore be viewed as a “Party Girl”. Other female characters in this ad wear sexy evening gowns as well. The waitress is in her sexy suit and there is a scene focusing on her breasts. At the end of this ad, one of the women says, “You are good and skilful.” This is very seductive as it makes people relate her comment to sexual behavior. In these respects, the women are sexualized. They are portrayed as seductive and appealing to men.

There are two ways to interpret the woman’s behavior in this ad. One possible interpretation is that the woman is portrayed as helpless who needs men’s support in solving problems. This could be seen when the woman cannot get the requested beer, she does not do anything but simply shakes her head. She seems to need Jet’s help. While Jet is getting the liquor for her, she only watches without being actively involved. The audience may therefore interpret that the woman is helpless and cannot solve the problem by herself.

Another interpretation is that the woman is portrayed as “smart” and “clever” and that she exploits her femininity to get what she wants. The woman who cannot get the requested beer tries to hint at Jet to get the beer for her. In this way, the portrayal of
woman could be interpreted as being “clever” and “smart”. Although some positive portrayals of women are found in this way of interpretation, some stereotypes about gender roles could still be seen. For example, the woman has to be pretty and attractive enough so as to exploit her femininity. An ugly, fat old lady would probably be ignored if she was doing the same. According to Lukas (2007), a woman who exploits her body and attractiveness to get what she wants is a kind of stereotype which is commonly found in ads. This portrayal is considered as stereotypical because it reduces women’s body to a tool for achieving certain goals.

4.2 Carlsberg TV Ad
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIwSx75R2h4)

4.2.1 Contents

Three men are inside a gym room. A woman, in a white vest and a tiny pair of shorts which reveal part of her buttocks, passes by. The men continue to walk around the gym room where many women are doing exercises. They look at a woman who is stretching her legs in front of them. While one of those men is doing his exercises, three women in their white V-neck vests and tiny pairs of shorts are beside him, helping him to lift the weight and to wipe his sweat. While another man is doing sit-ups, a woman wearing a white V-neck vest which reveals part of her breasts smiles at him.

(The camera focuses on the woman’s breast)

Then, the three men dive into a swimming pool. A woman in the pool wearing a sleeveless dress comes along with three bottles of Carlsberg. The three men drink Carlsberg happily with the woman standing beside them.

(Voiceover: “可惜嘉士伯唔搞健身室，一搞都可能係最好。嘉士伯，可能係世界上最好嘅啤酒。”“Carlsberg does not open a gymnasium. If we did, it would be the best. Carlsberg, probably the best lager in the world.”)

(A cup of Carlsberg appears followed by the logo of Carlsberg.)
4.2.2 Portrayal of men

As compared to the San Miguel TV ad which tries to imitate a real life scenario in a bar, the Carlsberg TV ad is like a fiction which presents men’s dream to the audience. It is expected that the portrayals of both men and women are thus fictionalized and dramatized.

In this ad, three men walk around in the gym room and voyeuristically gaze at the women who are wearing sexy sportswear. When the men are doing their exercises and after they have dived into the swimming pool, there are sexy women around them waiting to serve them. These representations show that men supposedly dream of being able to gaze at women and being served by them.

4.2.3 Portrayal of women

At the end of the ad, the voiceover says, “Carlsberg does not open a gymnasium. If we did, it would be the best.” This implies that a gymnasium with sexy women and beer would be the best gymnasium in the world since it makes every man’s dream come true. The portrayals of women, though fictionalized, could tell us some of the criteria to become an “ideal” woman in men’s dream. The portrayals of women in this ad are homogenized. They are attractive, slender, young and obedient. Also, they have big breasts and long hair. These are some characteristics that men desire women to have according to the ad. However, these expectations are stereotypical as they fail to celebrate the diversities of women’s personality and physical appearance.

The shooting techniques used in this ad “dismember women’s bodies” (White, 1990). The female characters in this ad wear sexy sportswear like a white vest revealing part of their breasts and a tiny pair of shorts revealing part of their buttocks. Together with the camera focusing on their breasts and other body parts such as their stretched legs, women’s bodies are seen as “dismembered”. Lukas (2007) considers this kind of representation as a “dehumanization of women” since it portrays woman as “less-than-human objects”. Suggested by Finkelstein (1998: 51), one way to dehumanize is “to reduce human beings to a single characteristic or feature of appearance, origin, or gender and/or to identify the person by something that is only a part rather than the totality.” In this ad, there are scenes focusing on women’s breast and legs which reduce women to these body parts. These scenes portray women as some “less-than-human objects” (i.e. separate body parts). Therefore, they could be interpreted as “dehumanizing women”.

4.3 Blue Girl TV Ad
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Sc-pK5a_TA)

4.3.1 Contents

Three men wearing thick clothes are making a big cup-shaped ice sculpture in a mountain. Two people wearing masks come along on a sledge with two huskies.

(Background music begins: “I’ve been waiting for a girl like you to come into my life, I’ve been waiting for someone new to make me feel alive”)

The people who come along take off their sunglasses and take out some bottles of Blue Girl. Then, they take off their jackets. They are women, one of them wears a vest, a pair of trousers and a scarf and the other wears a shirt and a pair of trousers. The women then distribute some bottles of Blue Girl to the men who are making the ice sculpture. One of the men pours the liquor into the cup-shaped ice sculpture. It turns out to be a huge beer glass. The man then turns on the tap and the liquor flows out from the huge beer glass. Three men and two women have fun and drink Blue Girl happily.

(Voiceover: “等待 此刻盡精彩 藍妹啤酒” meaning “Clearly worth waiting for. Blue Girl”)

(A big bottle of Blue Girl appears together with the slogan.)

4.3.2 Portrayal of men

In this ad, there are three male characters carving a big cup-shaped ice sculpture in the mountain. There is no woman helping them. It seems that manual jobs like this are usually done by men. Being responsible for making the sculpture, men in this way are portrayed as “tough” and “strong”. These portrayals may give us clues that men are generally expected to do the manual jobs and to behave in a “tough” manner.
4.3.3 Portrayal of women

There are two ways to interpret the portrayals of women in this ad. The first interpretation is that the relationship between men and women is harmonious and cooperative as they collaborate with each other well (i.e. men are responsible for making the huge ice sculpture, while women are responsible for delivering bottles of Blue Girl). At the end of the ad, the men and the women share the beer and have fun together. These scenarios suggest that both men and women are equally important. These elements make the Blue Girl ad the most moderate among the three ads here.

Another possible interpretation of this ad is that women are portrayed as being the enjoyment of men. At the end of the ad, the slogan says, “clearly worth waiting for”. As shown in the ad, the men are waiting for the beer as well as for the women. Some audiences may therefore equate beer with women as the enjoyment and desire of men. Besides, the lyrics of the background music are “I’ve been waiting for a girl like you to come into my life. I’ve been waiting for someone new to make me feel alive”. The word “girl” could mean “a girl” or the liquor “Blue Girl”. This ambiguity also leads people to associate beer with women. Moreover, the word “girl” instead of “women” is used. This seems to assign a diminutive role to the female characters.

While the men are wearing thick garments, the women in this ad wear only a vest or a shirt. It is not quite possible for the women to dress like this in such a freezing condition. However, this scenario makes the advertisement more appealing especially to the male audiences who probably are the target consumers of the product. The advertisers seem to exploit women’s face and body so as to attract more male customers. In this respect, the portrayal of women is rather stereotypical as the focus is put on their attractiveness but not on other positive traits of women.

4. Awareness about gender identities presented in these alcohol ads

Apart from analyzing the portrayals of men and women in the three alcohol ads and revealing gendered ideologies, I have also shown these ads to five men and five women whose age range was from 18 – 24 so as to collect their opinions. Their responses showed their awareness about gender roles and thus awareness about ideologies presented in the alcohol ads.
When responding to the statement “please use an adjective to describe each ad”, four men and a woman claimed that San Miguel TV ad was “attractive” as the scenes were beautifully shot; three women reported that this ad was “old-fashioned”; a male respondent said that it was “normal”; and a female respondent said that it was “unrealistic” as it put too much emphasis on men’s strength. The majority (five men and four women) reported that Carlsberg TV ad was “funny”. Only one female respondent reported that the ad was “degrading” which devalued women. Two men and three women thought that the Blue Girl TV ad was “normal”; one man and two women thought that it was “boring”; two male respondents said that it was “unattractive”. They all agreed that the Blue Girl TV ad was “nothing special”.

After analyzing the three alcohol ads, we can see that they all degrade women as subordinates of men. Yet, only a few respondents described the ads as “degrading” and “unrealistic”. Some of them found that these alcohol ads were “normal”. This shows that audiences may not be aware of the hidden ideologies when they are exposed to these kinds of ads. The absence of awareness reveals that the ideologies are generally naturalized and become “common sense” shared by certain groups of people (Burton, 2005: 351).

Besides, most of the subjects reported that the ads of “San Miguel” and “Blue Girl” were “old-fashioned/weird because of their storylines”. They did not like these two ads because of their old-fashioned/weird storylines but not because of the stereotypical/distorted images of men and/or women. On the other hand, most of the respondents liked the Carlsberg TV ad. They agreed that this ad could show men’s desire in an interesting way. When talking about the degree of liking an ad, the audiences put much focus on the contents and storylines of the ads; they did not seem to be aware of the underlying gender ideologies. This may reflect that the ideologies which affect the portrayals of men and women are generally naturalized by the ads without audience’s questioning.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, in the three alcohol TV ads, men are portrayed as strong, clever, charming and tough. All of these portrayals are positive attributes possessed by the male characters. On the contrary, women are portrayed as seductive, physically attractive,
sometimes smart and cooperative. They are sometimes dehumanized since their body parts are dismembered by the camera. They are also commodified when they are equated with the beer as the enjoyment of men.

These portrayals generally reinforce socialized ideologies about gender roles where men and women are falling into two extremes of binary opposition: men possess superior traits while women possess inferior traits. However, there is one ideology conveyed in the ads that is slightly different from the traditional cultural expectation on female characters. Chan (1995: 19) suggested that “a good mother/housewife is always a typical model for eastern women. It seems natural for advertising to present female characters in fulfilling this role”. Women are generally presented as good mother/housewife in local ads, yet in the alcohol ads, the women are sexualized – they are portrayed as a little bit naughty and flirty. The reason could be that alcohol can raise people’s emotions and they may act in a naughty or flirty manner after consuming the alcoholic drinks. It would be inconsistent with the image of alcoholic beverages if a housewife-like woman was shown in the ad. Media Awareness Network (2009) summarized five major types of female characters being presented in liquor ads, they are “The Sexpot/Bimbo”, “The Men Eater”, “The Rebel”, “The Prize” and “The Party Girl”. Out of these five characters, the portrayal of women as being “The Party Girl” is found in the San Miguel ad. These portrayals are different from that of being a good mother/housewife. On the one hand, we may say that there are some new ideologies replacing the old ones. On the other hand, we may say that both kinds of ideologies exist at the same time. As the natures of the products being advertised are different, the portrayals of women and hence the ideologies involved are different.

Apart from noticing how women are portrayed in alcohol ads, it is also important for us to think about what kinds of women portrayals are not found in the alcohol ads. The portrayals of women as being fat, old and poorly-dressed are generally absent in these ads. The assumptions of women’s role as being physically attractive may impact on women’s identity construction in these ads, and there seems to be no room for displaying the kinds of ladies that fall outside the categories of “ideal women” (i.e. sexy & attractive). Thus, it is seen that the female characters in alcohol ads are homogenized as sexually attractive, seductive and appealing to men.

In addition, the audience of the alcohol ads does not seem to be aware of the gender ideologies that are being reinforced. Rather, they focus more on the contents and storylines of the ads. One reason to explain this phenomenon is that the ideologies are generally hidden and sometimes even naturalized which make the audience believe
that the portrayals of men and women are “natural”. Therefore, they seldom question them.

Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that since the TV commercials are costly but short, advertisers usually extract the most important messages and exaggerate them. Studying these exaggerated portrayals may only give us some insights into prevailing gender ideologies but not a full picture of the real situation. Besides, as the alcohol advertisements are presumably targeted at men, in order to please the target audience, the advertisers may tend to portray men more positively.

References


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