

Meaning Construction of Modern Women in Weight-loss Coffee Advertisements

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to study symbolic meanings of modern women in weight-loss coffee advertisements, popular drinks among Thai working women. This qualitative research had been conducted based on textual analysis of weight-loss coffee advertisements that had been broadcasted through varieties of advertising channels during 2008-2012. Research results had been found that weight-loss coffee advertisements constructed to represent many symbolic meanings including the symbolic meanings of healthy women, slender women, beautiful women, confident women, successful women and attractive women. Moreover, advertising channel is a method to construct and reconstruct meaning and identity to control as well as dominate women. The weight-loss coffee companies try to relate between consumption and identity, for example, the company constructed symbolic meaning of confident and successful women when drinking weight-loss coffee through selecting advertising strategies. Besides that, appeals had also been parts of selecting advertising strategies, such as sex appeal, anxiety appeal, and humor appeal while usage of factual message, comparison and binary opposition as well as presenter had also been utilized.

Consequently, it is important for advertising, one of the powerful mass media, to define the symbolic and cultural meaning and construct woman image in consumer society. Unsurprisingly, women became victims of consumer culture.

Keywords : meaning construction, femininity, weight-loss coffee advertisements

Introduction

‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’. This is a statement of Simone de Beauvoir who wrote in her book, *The Second Sex*, in 1949. The statement reflected the difference between sex and gender; sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that body acquires, the variable modes of that body’s acculturation. (Butler, 1986)

For gender, cultural meaning has been constructed through a variety of socially institutions such as family institutions, religion institutions, education institutions, politics and government institutions, medical institutions, economic institutions as well as media institution.

In terms of communication, media might be considered as social institutions and it might construct one’s meaning and identity. As we know, media is powerful institution to define, construct and distribute meaning to publics especially if media has a potential to communicate, the meaning will be produced and reproduced again and again. Therefore, media play an important role to control and dominate people through meaning that it constructed.

World Health Organization (WHO, 2012) revealed overweight and obesity are the fifth leading risk for global deaths. At least 2.8 million adults die each year as a result of being overweight or obese. In addition, 44% of the diabetes burden, 23% of the ischemic heart disease burden and between 7% and 41% of certain cancer burdens are attributable to overweight and obesity. Some WHO global estimates from 2008 that more than 1.4 billion adults, 20 and older, were overweight and of these overweight adults, over 200 million men and nearly 300 million women were obese. Overall, more than one in ten of the world’s adult population was obese.

Over the last decade, excess body weight has become a global public health epidemic. One billion seven-hundred million individuals were estimated to be overweight in 2005. and being overweight was the eighth most important risk factor contributing to the total global burden of disease in 2001. The epidemic is occurring across the globe with growing prevalence in the developing world, due largely to the rapid changes in behavior and lifestyle, such as diet and physical activity, which have accompanied economic development. In Thailand, overweight and obesity have become increasingly prominent public health priorities, with non-communicable disease and risk factors playing a growing role as the country moves through the epidemiological transition from infectious to predominantly chronic diseases. In 1999, obesity was the seventh ranked risk factor in men (2.4% of all disability-adjusted life years in men) and the second ranked risk factor in women (6.1% of all disability-adjusted life years in women) (Aekplakorn et al, 2007)

Nutrition Association of Thailand (2010) revealed the prevalence of overweight and obesity had been increased in all age since 1986. In 2003-2004, the obesity of women is higher than men (34.4% to 22.5%) as well as in 2008-2009; women are overweight and obesity than men (40.7% to 28.4). Moreover, Ministry of Public Health indicated that for the past six years, women faced with the obesity especially working age population.

In terms of meaning construction of modern women through media, it is a crucial issue to concern especially when business sectors use advertising channels to promote their products and services because not only selling product but also constructing meaning together with products.

As mentioned above, nowadays, Thai women encounter with obesity and most of them want to lose their weight in order to get a desired body. An important problem for Thai women is that have no time because of their working lifestyle, Therefore, this is a golden opportunity for weight-loss coffee company to promote products to their target groups through advertising channels. Apart from selling product which is company's ultimate goal, weight-loss coffee company also construct meanings of modern women that control and dominate women to be feminine identity. Like Kellner (2001 cited in Damean, 2006) said in the contemporary society, identity is strongly mediated by images provided by the mass culture, offering ideals for modeling one's personal identity. For instance, advertising, fashion or television constantly reconstruct the identity, producing a more fluid and changing one.

This is a reason why this research focused on meaning construction of modern women in weight-loss coffee advertisements.

Research Objective

To study symbolic meanings of modern women in weight-loss coffee advertisements.

Research Methodology

The research tool for this study was the textual analysis of weight-loss coffee television commercials that were broadcasted through varieties of advertising channels during 2008-2012.

Research Results

Research results found that weight-loss coffee companies used advertising channels to construct many symbolic meanings including the symbolic meanings of healthy women, slender women, beautiful women, confident women, successful women and attractive women.

In terms of meaning of healthy women, research found that weight-loss coffee advertisement tried to construct modern women must be healthy. Therefore, weight-

loss coffee companies used advertising channels to promote their products, weight-loss coffee, with many healthy ingredients, for example, fibers, vitamins, minerals and ginseng extracts, chromium, collagen, l-carnitine, white kidney beans and etc. These ingredients help women to be healthy without exercising.

As shown in Figure 1, Nescafe Protect Pro Slim Coffee, one of the popular weight-loss coffee companies in Thailand, used the television commercial to inform consumers that Nescafe Protect Pro Slim ingredients consisted of healthy ingredients.

Figure 1 : Nescafe Protect Pro Slim advertisement showed many healthy ingredients in weight-loss coffee.



For meaning of slender women, research showed all of weight-loss coffee advertisements constructed the meaning of slender women which dominate women to control their weight. The weight-loss coffee advertisements used presenters, such as Thai superstars and supermodels, to represent modern women with slim body [Figure 2]. The story telling in advertisements also indicated that only women with slim body attract men.

Figure 2 : Fitne coffee advertisement using Thai superstar with slim body.



The research also found that weight-loss coffee companies used advertising strategies to support the symbolic meaning construction, for example; binary opposition, factual message, sexual-appeal, unique selling proposition, slice of life, anxiety ads, humor appeal.

As shown in Figure 3, Buddy Dean Slim Slen Coffee used advertising strategy, binary opposition, to compare between fat woman and slender woman. Meanwhile, Prew Coffee used slice of life strategy to show that modern women faced with a difficult problem to lose their weight so the weight-loss coffee was an easy solution. [Figure 4]

Figure 3 : Binary opposition strategy in Buddy Dean Slim Slen Coffee advertisement.



Figure 4 : Slice of life strategy in Prew Coffee.



Besides that, research found the weight-loss coffee companies used advertising channels to construct the meaning of beautiful women and this meaning came with the meaning of slender women. The advertisements presented beautiful image of modern women and of course this beauty image is meaning of social norm. Moreover, the advertisements also said 'Women, do not stop the beauty' that meant modern women must take care of themselves. The beauty meaning supported the patriarchy ideology to dominate women under the myth of beauty. Moreover, another symbolic meaning that showed in the weight-loss coffee advertisements is the meaning of attractive women. The advertisements tried to make a story that only beautiful women will attract men like women with slim body.

For meaning of confident women, research found not only healthy, slender and beautiful meaning, but the advertisements constructed meaning of confident for modern women. Women felt confident if they were healthy, slender and beautiful. Whereas the meaning construction of successful women came to support all of the meanings because if women are healthy, slender, attractive and beautiful, they will be successful in their life.

Conclusions

Damean (2006) wrote media representations of femininity have a strong impact on women and on the shaping of their identities. In the postmodern culture of image, the scenes, the stories and the cultural texts provided by the media are meant to offer the individuals a variety of attitudes that can shape their personality. These images provide social role models, appropriate and inappropriate patterns of behavior, style and fashion and a subtle impulse of imitating and identifying with certain identities. Women are supposed to have a variety of models to choose from when constructing

their image and assuming their roles, but the truth is that their options are quite limited and induced by the media. While Wolf (1991) wrote in 'The Beauty Myth' those women must want to embody it and men want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless.

According to this research, the results indicated that advertising channel, one of the powerful media, became an important tools for weight-loss coffee companies to construct a variety of symbolic meanings to control and dominate modern women under patriarchy ideology. Unsurprisingly, modern women became victims of patriarchy ideology and consumer culture.

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