Weight-Loss Advertisements and the Weight-Loss Fashion in China

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Abstract

With the social and economic development in China, weight-loss advertisements have become an essential part of people's daily life and the weight-loss fashion can be seen everywhere. Both the advertisements and fashion fall into the category of culture and thus there exist some close relationships between them. Weight-loss advertisements create and guide the weight-loss fashion, and exert great influence on its development. This paper begins with some background information and then tries to explain the relationships between weight-loss advertisements and the weight-loss fashion, the harmfulness of and reasons for following the weight-loss trend blindly. Lastly we proceed to the regulation of weight-loss advertisements and other measures to combat those issues and ensure the healthy development of the weight-loss fashion.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of economy in China and the rise of people's living standards, more and more new advertisements appear and enrich people's daily life. Advertisements, which bear such purposes as promoting sales, recommending products and advocating social morals are ubiquitous. They impress us so much before we know it. Overwhelming advertisements appear out of every corner of the society and dominates people's life. With the help of modern media, advertisements have great effects on people. "In the process of business dissemination, advertisements not only have complicated relationships with culture, but also have affected so many aspects of the cultural construction and development." (Zhang, 2002)

In the second half of the 20th century, advertisements make full use of culture in business dissemination. Then, advertising culture emerges as the time requires. The so-called advertising cultures refer to universal ethical principle orientation in information dissemination and patterns that guide people's behaviors. Advertising culture is mass culture and it's commercial. (Zhang & Xiao, 2005) But because of the contradiction between social benefits and commercial benefits, advertisements do more harm than good to social culture. And fashion highlights advertising culture with the sustained and rapid development of economy. Looking around, you will find almost everything concerned with fashionable goods. Where there are advertisements, there is relevant fashion. "To a certain degree, advertisements affect social culture via fashion." (Zhang & Xiao, 2005)

2. Relationship between Weight-Loss Advertisements and the Weight-Loss Fashion

2.1 Current Situation of Weight-Loss Advertisements

As Asia Times reported, Chinese government once did a survey about the state of nutrition and health in 2015. It shows that, there is one person who is overweight in every five people, and there is one person who has exceeded the standard of obesity. When we consider the whole population, about 2 billion people are overweight, and at least 90 million are obesity patients (Note 1). As a result, a high-profit industry --- weight losing industry is booming. Chinese health-care products market started in 1992, and by 2014, weight-loss products have taken almost half of health-care market (Note 2). As those ads emerge in different kinds of media, a variety of crises appear, among which the crisis of belief is the most serious. The main reason is that there is so much false information in the ads. For example, some ads may claim that people can lose weight successfully in a short period of time, but it often proves untrue. Sometimes they use fake authoritative institution to disseminate pseudoscience. Some ads assert that if there are no effects after using the products, you can have a refund. But often the case is that you will never get a penny back. (Zhang, 2013) For the lack of efficient supervision over weight-loss advertising in China, this phenomenon exists ubiquitously.

2.2 Development of the Weight-Loss Fashion

In the 1990s, the weight-loss fashion stepped into people's life gradually. Ways of losing weight are becoming more and more diverse and the number of those people is on the rise.

In the long feudal society, agricultural production dominates the economy. Production is restricted by social-economic formation, natural conditions, diseases and disasters. The number of harvest years can be counted on our fingers in history. Famine and disasters are innumerable. To eat their fill and dress warmly is always the unreachable dream of the lower class. And this can be seen from people's worship of food. Therefore, before Qing Dynasty, except for some people in the upper class, the masses all follow the fashion of stoutness, for in their minds stoutness stands for richness. With the coming of modern times, opium overflowed, Chinese people were called Patients of East Asia. And thinness became a symbol of patients. In contemporary China, especially after the policies of reform and opening up to the outside world, with our material and cultural life greatly enriched, obesity becomes a social problem, and the fashion of losing weight is more and more popular.

In accordance with the ideas of social psychology, fashion refers to unconventional behavior patterns within the masses. It is shown by quite a few people with certain ideas, behaviors, languages, living styles in a specific period of time. And fashion can be seen here and there. Weight-loss fashion is a group trend of similar social psychology and behaviors in the process of pursuing health and beauty. (Chen, 2005)

2.3 Relationships between Weight-Loss Advertisements and the Weight-Loss Fashion

Many different reasons result in the fashion of weight-loss. Although weight-loss advertisements are not the only factor to account for this fashion, they play an important and indispensable role. Many people have been affected by the advertisements to join in the practice of losing weight. Yet most of them don't achieve the intended effect.

Advertisements show the development of fashion honestly. They get inspiration from fashionable ideas and the system of symbols. And advertisements have strong abilities of propagating and facilitating fashion. Lured by advertisements, the masses often go with the tide. Advertisements are the information source of fashion, and can deliver great social and fashion changes.

The effects of ads on fashion are not only informative but also goal-oriented. Advertisements of weight-loss practice are highly sensitive to social psychology. The fashion of weight-loss practice has become a trend before people are conscious of the negative effects of pursuing beauty. At this moment, advertisements of weight-loss practice play such roles as stimulating the needs of weight-loss products, changing people's old ideas of weight-loss into a new standard of beauty and life philosophy. With the aid of the remarkable techniques of modern media, advertisements of weight-loss become ever more attractive. Males and females, girls and boys, almost everyone becomes the assimilator of weight-loss advertisements consciously or unconsciously.

3. Phenomena and Harmfulness of Following the Weight-Loss Trend Blindly

3.1 Phenomena of Following the Weight-Loss Trend Blindly

In accordance with the survey of Peking citizens' weight losing from CMMR, not only the fat, but also people with normal weight and even people under weight are losing weight. In the survey, people who are quite overweight occupy 43.7 percent of the weight losing people, people who are a little overweight occupy 18.8 percent, people with normal weight occupy 33.7 percent and people underweight occupy 3.8 percent (Note 3). On one hand, those numbers show people don't have objective and standard cognition of obesity. On the other hand, people who are losing weight want so-called beautiful and slim bodies.

Losing weight, as its literal meaning indicates, applies to the fat people. According to a related survey, women who are overweight occupy 51.6 percent of all the overweight people. Middle aged people and old people occupy a larger part. That is, people from 35 to 44 years old occupy 38.7 percent and people from 45 to 54 years old occupy 30.6 percent (Note 4). If it is in proportion, we can infer that women and men who take part in weight-loss practice should be about fifty fifty, and most of them are middle aged and old people. However, it's not the truth. The survey shows that women occupy 76.3 percent, while men occupy only 23.7 percent. In view of the age group, the middle aged people occupy the largest part.

The standards of beauty are not the same, owing to the diversity of cultures. Even within the same culture, people may have quite contrasting aesthetic standards because of different personal experiences and senses of worth. But in the weight-loss fashion all the standards reconcile into one --- slim beauty, which naturally becomes the ultimate goal for those brainwashed to become one of slim beauties.

According to the standard of Asian-Pacific region, BMI (Body Mass Index)= $weight/height^2$. If BMI is less than 18.5, then it's regarded as underweight. If BMI is between 18.5 and 22.9, it stands for normal. If BMI is over 23,

it means overweight. If BMI is over 25, it means obesity. If BMI is over 30, it's serious obesity.

Although the index can serve as the standard of normality instead of beauty, beauty, in our minds, is always closely bound up with normal situation, for "normal" is directly related to "healthy". Thus we can say that the so called "standard" born by people who don't need to lose weight but still choose to do so is not only unhealthy but morbid.

3.2 Harmfulness of Following the Weight-Loss Trend Blindly

3.2.1 Harmfulness to the Body

The most direct harm of following weight-loss trend blindly is the harm to the body. In order to pursue the so-called beauty, people would do almost anything at the sacrifice of their health.

As the health awareness increases, people come to realize the harm of obesity. Cardiovascular diseases and nutritional and metabolic diseases accompany obesity. At present, obesity, AIDS, drug taking and excessive drinking have been regarded as the four most serious social and medical problems. Therefore, obesity has been regarded as a kind of disease and it has become the first problem of health, according to related information from WHO. Much clinical observation shows that taking medicine blindly and losing weight blindly will give rise to the probability of menstrual disorder, gall-stone, brain damage, and some other diseases. People lose weight mainly by diarrhea, which may result in collapse, hypoglycemia, and heart disease. In September 2011, a Shanghai girl Wang Ting and an overseas student from Chongqing Liu Yanmei died of taking fake weight-loss medicine (Note 5).

3.2.2 False Judgment of People

Women care about their stature a lot, for they think it's of great importance. As the weight-loss fashion develops, a slim figure becomes something a woman values much. And it is usually connected with a promising job and love. A female who has a charming figure seems more likely to own a successful career, sweet love and happy life. As the weight-loss fashion gets more and more popular, people have a clear-cut attitude towards fatness and thinness.

Nowadays a slim figure has become the tool for the females to be successful. Clothes and body become the symbols of fashion. The value of a female is reduced to her appearance and women have become the slaves of their bodies.

3.2.3 Extreme Life Styles

Fashion is one kind of consumption, for every fashion is related to material things. The weight-loss fashion is no exception. In order to follow the trend of weight-loss fashion, people, especially women, spare no efforts and afford whatever they can to purchase the products which are claimed to make them slim and fashionable. At present, Chinese annual product value of weight-loss products has reached ten billion. Weight-loss clubs are ubiquitous. Those people's lives have changed so much. Some of them suffer from starvation, some take exercise excessively by themselves or go to weight-loss clubs to engage in all kinds of activities, some rearrange their diet list or the timetable for meals, some resort to unhealthy and irrational medicines or health-care food, and still others choose to undergo plastic surgery to make themselves thin. In a word, many people live a miserable life because of losing weight.

3.2.4 Distorted Aesthetic Standards

Because of following the trend of weight-loss fashion blindly, people develop a narrow and limited appreciation of beauty. Under the influence of genes and environment, each person has his or her own characteristics and appearance. We should treasure our unique features and the naturalness of life. The world is full of diversity and that is why our life can be so colorful. We should learn to appreciate different kinds of beauty instead of developing a narrow and limited outlook of beauty.

4. Reasons for Following the Weight-Loss Trend Blindly

According to the theory of communication studies, the communication of advertisements contains sender, message, medium, receiver and feedback. (Shu, 2003) As part of advertisements, weight-loss advertisements work the same. Let's discuss the reasons why people follow the trend blindly.

4.1 Exaggerated Description of the Weight-Loss Function of the Products in Weight-Loss Ads

Just as the name implies, weigh-loss products are for obese people. Therefore, the main function is to help people to keep healthy. But as a matter of fact, many advertisements describe their products exaggeratedly. Health should be the basic thing, but few ads treat it seriously or cover up the side effects deliberately.

Weight-loss ads always use models with slim bodies, slim waists and flat bellies to impress the audience, seducing them to buy the products recommended.

4.2 Exhaustion of Every Means by Weight-Loss Advertisements to Influence the Audience

Media is of great importance in the society. In the modern society, without the promotion of media, the weight-loss fashion could not have developed so quickly and successfully. The most obvious feature about the propagation of weight-loss advertisements is its extensiveness. Weight-loss advertisements can be spread through television, newspaper, broadcast, magazines etc. In short, weight-loss advertisements can be found everywhere and almost everyone can get the information through one channel or another. In the booming advertising industry nowadays, weight-loss advertisements have their own special secrets to make people follow the trend blindly.

Unilaterally emphasizing slim figure and ignoring the importance of health, weight-loss advertisements aim at young people and the middle-aged. As a tool of propagating information, advertisements impress consumers and persuade them to buy the products in the end. Generally speaking, advertisements impress the masses with their brand names, celebrities, and slogans, which are regarded as the most important and core elements of advertisements.

Saussure once said that, symbols can be classified into two parts--denotation and connotation. (Saussure, 1985) Advertisements of weight-loss practice affect people's value orientation by both denotation and connotation, which are the special tactics. They attach love and marriage, successful undertaking, confidence, status to slim body, trying to make people believe that all the good days will come with your slim body.

4.3 Advocating Thinness with a Capital A

The standard of beauty is not just the product of modern society, but has a long history. "Birds are chipping for love at the riverbank, and slim and beautiful ladies are good partners for gentlemen." (one sentence in the article "Guanju" in the Book of Poems, one of China's classic books known as Four Books and Five Sculptures), which implies the love for slim beauties. Another example is in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Period (one dynasty in ancient China), King Chuling was fond of slender waist. In order to play up to the king, the ministers and attendants in the palace reduced their food to lose weight. Therefore, many people died of starvation. And in Han Dynasty, the fashion of thinness still prevailed. The imperial concubine Zhao Feiyan who is quite slim won the favor of Emperor Hancheng.

People in different places also have different standards of beauty. There was once a country called Luosha in the legend, where people thought unlovely things lovely. People there overturned the standard of beauty. Although it was imaginary, we can see that the standard of beauty is deeply rooted in the environment.

Although thinness has never been the main trend for a long period for the general people, we do find some examples in our long history when the upper society values thinness. Yet when the time elapses to our age, we find we are inevitably influenced by the contemporary social atmosphere --- worshipping thinness. Nowadays many people alter themselves to conform to the prevailing ideology of thinness either to be "fashionable" or simply to follow the crowd.

Female stars become the first to be inculcated with the ideology of thinness, out of full identification with the ideology or just pretending to like being thin. Anyhow, it pays off as the public "buy it". When they appear in the advertisements of weight-loss, people are persuaded to believe if they buy the products in the advertisements, they can be as slim and as beautiful as the stars.

Most of the products are sold in the market for at most three years. Therefore, advertising companies spare no efforts to achieve the greatest economic benefits. In a sense, they make full use of people's aspiration--- to become slim and beautiful---to earn money.

Some manufacturers do not hesitate to spend much to ask the super stars to be their spokesmen (more often spokeswomen). They claim that people with slim bodies can be as beautiful as those stars and can be successful as well. With the help of media and the guide of the stars, they promote the selling of the products. Driven by commercial effects, more people join in the tide of losing weight.

4.4 Fears of People towards Obesity and Strong Desire to Be Recognized

First and foremost, let's talk about fear, which is the basic mental state when people feel insecure or frightened. (Lei & Wang, 2005) So what does obesity mean for obese people and even healthy people? What frightens them? There are three reasons why people fear obesity. Firstly, obesity results in a series of diseases and threatens the health of people. Secondly, obesity induces senility, which is the fatal attack to women who care about their

appearance. Thirdly, fear of bad impression on others. When people consider obesity as ugly, they try to follow the trend crazily. (Zhang, 2005)

What's more, let's talk about conformity and simulation. For most of us, it is unbearable to be treated as strange people and not of the same clan. Therefore, people do their best to adapt to the environment around them to make themselves feel better.

5. Regulation of Weight-Loss Advertisements to Ensure the Healthy Development of the Weight-Loss Fashion

5.1 Appearance of the Favorable Trend of the Weight-Loss Fashion

In December, 2000, the British government declared prohibiting advertisers' hiring very thin models (determined by the BMI). The reason is that more and more women are found to have disordered diets and the media prefer super thin models to other women. In November 25th, 2002, Information Times reported that, although slim and sexy Barbie dolls are loved by children and adults from different countries, they are doubted by the public. Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, said that, the slim bodies of Barbie dolls corrode pure hearts of children. In September, 2006, British minister of culture called on sponsors of London Fashion Week not to use super slim models. And five models were weeded out of the Spanish grand meeting of costumes because of their BMI (Body Mass Index). Although bony beauty is still popular during the past fifteen years, said The Wall Street Journal, people have come to realize the importance of health.

5.2 Measures to Reduce the Negative Effects of Weight-Loss Advertisements

Faced with the ubiquity of weight-loss advertisements and the corresponding serious social consequences, many governments have taken measures to supervise the advertisement market. We should ensure the favorable trend of weight-loss fashion through social advocating as well as strict regulations of weight-loss advertising.

5.2.1 Advocating of Healthy Weight-Loss Practice in the Whole Society

Social advocating, often in the way of public opinion guidance, should come first in terms of reducing the negative effects of weight-loss advertisements. The public like to follow the trend if there are bony models everywhere, in billboards, in posters, in magazines, or on TV and radio. People would be influenced subconsciously or deliberately. Thus the media should take the lead in guiding the public in the weight-loss practice. For example, The TV program producers should make some kinds of programs to draw people's attention to healthy lifestyles and bad impacts brought by impropriate weight-loss behaviors. The teachers can also instill ideas of healthy living ways in their classes. Parents, friends or other relatives can also play some part in the campaign against the bad effects of weight-loss advertisements.

5.2.2 Improvement of Laws and Regulations to Monitor Weight-Loss Advertisements

The modes of propagation and channels of communication change day by day. Advertisements are now spreading phenomenally, more than we can imagine. Like other advertisements, weight-loss ads should comply with advertising management laws and regulations. Advertising management laws and regulations refer to the Advertisement Law of the People's Republic of China as well as other relevant laws, rules and regulations. (Yang, 1998)

As advertising management laws and regulations are not impeccable and sometimes have ambiguous interpretations, many advertisers thus make full use of those imperfections and do harm to the public. Therefore, we should improve the legislation of weight-loss advertisements comprehensively.

What's more, there is close relationship between the bad influence of advertisements and loose management of them. Advertisements have great influences on social customs, people's concept of value, and moral norms. So it's very significant to enforce strictly advertising laws and regulations.

5.2.3 Strict Supervision and Censorship of Weight-Loss Advertisements

As early as in 1947, Coulter Lewin, a psychologist, said in "Channels of Group Life", "Information always flows through channels which contain square regulations or judgment there." The same theory applies to advertisements. So it's necessary to enhance the supervision and censorship of weight-loss advertisements.

In my view, the authority should at least supervise weight-loss advertisements in the following aspects:

Whether the advertiser has the capacity of a law subject;

Whether the contents of advertisement are true and whether it will mislead people;

Whether its contents are legal.

What's more, we have to make sure all the immoral, unhealthy and uncivilized elements in the advertisement are eliminated.

Let's work together to ensure the healthy development and correct direction of weight-loss advertisements and the weight-loss fashion!

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Notes

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