

**Constructed Hegemonic Femininity in the Realm
of China's E-commerce:
A Case Study of Singles' Day Sale**

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Abstract

This extended essay explores the construction of hegemonic femininity in the realm of Chinese e-commerce through a case study of the biggest online shopping festival in the world, the Singles' Day Sale. It first outlines the post-2008 global political economic contexts that have given rise to the explosion of e-commerce as a platform for the promotion of domestic consumption in China. Then, it uses the methodology of multimodal discourse analysis to reveal how the images used to promote the Singles Day Sale construct consumption as a defining feature of hegemonic femininity in contemporary China. Finally, it examines the possible implications of this process for the status of Chinese women. The conclusion critiques how the collusion between patriarchy and capitalism has provided Chinese women with the sugar-coated bullet of consumerism and unveils how this privileging of the consumption role of Chinese women conceals their productive role in society.

Keywords: Hegemonic Femininity; Singles' Day Sale; Alibaba; Consumerism; Consumption; Multimodal Discourse Analysis;

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

In the e-commerce era, various information of consumption can reach the public more rapidly and more conveniently than ever before. Lifestyles and value systems of consumerism are becoming a major part of people's daily activities, influencing their daily life and behavior pattern. This phenomenon is obvious in the development of China in recent decades. On November 11, 2015, Alibaba, the most famous empire of e-commerce in China, held a sumptuous celebration party for the Singles' Day Sale on Hunan satellite TV. In this party, the figure on the large screen of the hall at the Beijing Water Cube, which was showing the record of Singles' Day Sale, finally freeze-framed at "¥91,217,017,615". It means that the total turnover of Alibaba's 7th Singles' Day Sale hits the height of 90-billion-dimension. With a 50 million starting point in 2009, Singles' Day Sale 2015 gained a 1823 times increase in 7 years. Undoubtedly, it is a carnival of consumerism.

Consumerism originated in Western countries in the nineteenth century, widely spread all over the world in the following decades. The most striking prosperity of consumerism in China is in the last 30 years since the implementation of reform and open-up policy. It brought profound changes of consumption among urban and rural residents, significantly improved people's living standards, changed the consumption structure and gave birth to the consumer lifestyle. Among these series of

changes, the change of status of Chinese female is especially remarkable. With the rising purchasing power of women, female consumers play an irreplaceable role in the growth of consumerism. In particular, female consumers have become the main targets of e-commerce companies and the major force of consumerism in China. In fact, women's rising purchasing power and consuming behavior in e-commerce era are not only noticed by e-commerce companies but also by different researchers. For example, in order to obtain more benefits from the increasing of female consumers, researchers have conducted a large number of studies on marketing and advertising strategies towards female consumers. However, what can not be ignored is the research from the feminist perspectives on consumerism. Since the first wave of feminism, consumption has never faded away from feminist studies. However, feminist attitude toward consumerism is not immutable. In first-wave feminist theorizing, women's role as consumers was understood to have a positive political implication to the extent that consumption practices are said to contain elements of women's resistance against male domination, whereas, during second-wave feminism, consumption has been seen to confine women in their subordinate position (Hollows, 2013).

As a female consumer and a feminist scholar, I clearly feel that the dominant role of women in consumption never means the domination of women in economic life. Along with consumption coded as a female pursuit, frivolous and even wasteful, as well as a form of leisure rather than productive work, consumer identity obscures women's important contributions to economic and political life (Peiss, 1998). Among the different perspectives to analyze the relationship between consumerism and women, I choose to use the concept of hegemonic femininity as developed by Schippers (2007) as my theoretical tool. Built on the criticism and inheritance of Connell's (1998) model of

gender hegemony and multiple configurations of masculinity to femininity, Schippers (2007) offered us a conceptual framework for explaining how gender hegemony operates through hegemonic femininity to places men's dominance over women's. In this article, I will employ hegemonic femininity as the theoretical framework to explore the relationship between consumerism and female status in China. As an eight-year-old consumer of Taobao, the major shopping website of Alibaba, and an enthusiastic shopper in annual Singles' Day Sale, I decide to choose the images, such as advertising posters and caricatures in Singles' Day Sale as my case study to unveil this relationship. Because of the multimodal property of images, I will employ multimodal discourse analysis, which extends discourse analysis from linguistic field to the field of multimodal texts, as my research method. Through my analysis, I will try to answer the following questions: How do the images in Singles' Day Sale construct consumption as a characteristic of Chinese hegemonic femininity? What are the implications these images for the construction of hegemonic femininity in contemporary China? How does this hegemonic femininity maintain men's dominant position over women in China? What are the roles of economy and politics in the process of the construction of hegemonic femininity? Why is Chinese hegemonic femininity in the e-commerce era much different from the age before China's reform and open-up? What cause the differences? Through these questions, I will try to uncover the influence of consumerism in e-commerce of China on hegemonic femininity and the status of Chinese female.

I arrange my essay into six sections. Following this introductory section where I have already provided the background, key conceptions and basic questions of my topic, the second section will provide a synopsis of Alibaba and sort out the context of the development of Singles' Day Sale from both the political economic perspective and the

cultural perspectives. In the third section, the theoretical framework and methodology of this essay will be elaborated. In the fourth section, a multimodal discourse analysis will be applied to analyze the images in Singles' Day Sale. The fifth section will be the discussion on the result of the multimodal discourse analysis. The last section will contain a conclusion.

Chapter 2.

The Development of Singles' Day Sale

Alibaba Technology Co. LTD, also known as Alibaba, is a Chinese e-commercial company which provides C2C, B2C, B2B sales services and electronic payment services. Besides, it is an online shopping search engine which provides data-based cloud computing services. This company was founded by Jack Ma in 1999 with a beginning of B2B which connected Chinese manufacturers with overseas buyers. Since 2003, with the development and improvement of search engines, mobile Internet, social network and other emerging technologies and business models, e-commerce began to penetrate into all levels of society and economy and became a more comprehensive internet business platform. Taobao.com was founded in May 2003. After 20 days, it grew from a million users to 1.8 billion users by the end of 2003. In 2005, Alipay, a third-party payment instrument developed by Alibaba, began to offer secured full payment, through which an initial standardization of online payment in China was completed. Since then, online shopping in China has transited from concept to reality (Gao, 2015:6). In 2006, China's online shopping industry had an explosive growth. By then, Taobao had become Asia's largest shopping site, covering almost the majority of Chinese online shoppers. The establishment of the third-party delivery and payment platform made online shopping more convenient and smooth. Along with the transformation of small and medium-size enterprises from "Made in China" to "Created in China", online shopping

provides a greater platform for some original brands to develop with lower thresholds (Wang, 2014:18). B2C shopping in China began to boom.

2009 is the year when Singles' Day Sale started. Tmall (then known as Taobao Mall) began Singles' Day Sale on November 11, 2009. Singles' Day is a faux holiday originated by a group of young people from Nanjing University 20 years ago (Fan, 2014:26). Seen as a sub-cultural phenomenon, Singles' Day spread from a youth group to wider social groups, and has become a widely known online shopping festival. However, in its beginning, it was not supposed to be a promotional sale festival as it is the case with Black Friday. In fact, the starting point of Singles' Day Sale was just a regular sale. Selecting November 11 as the sale day was a somewhat risk, because it is located between Chinese National Day Golden Week sale and Christmas sale. At first it was just an attempt of attracting buyers. The original motivation was likely to try to see whether the online promotional activities could be an attractive point to consumers or not (Li, 2013:180). However, to everyone's surprise, Singles' Day Sale became the synonym of online shopping festival and changed the way of shopping. With an annual increase in the turnover of Singles' Day Sale, in 2011, Alibaba transformed its orientation from the "big Taobao" strategy to the "Big Ali" strategy and made the super sale in 2015 (Jang, 2011). After the brief introduction of Alibaba and Singles' Day Sales, I determined to observe the development of Singles' Day Sale in the historical context of Chinese society from 2009-2015 through the political economy perspective and the culture perspective.

2.1. Political Economy Perspective

In 2006, because of the bankruptcy of US sub-prime mortgage lender, the forced closure of investment funds, and the stock market storm, the global financial market suffered the shortage crisis of liquidity. In August 2007, the shortage crisis began to sweep over the United States, European Union, and Japan, which led to the full-blown financial crisis all over the world's major financial markets in September 2008 (Min, 2010). This global financial crisis, also known as the sub-prime crisis, seriously affected the growth of China's economy. The development of pillar industries in China, such as real estate, automobile manufacturing, and retailing sales, slowed down markedly and the stock market began to collapse. In response to the financial crisis, China proposed to implement a proactive fiscal policy and abandon monetary policy, including the 4 trillion RMB plan, the industrial revitalization, and the active employment policy, which on one hand maintained China's scientific development and social stabilization, on the other hand provided a conducive political environment for the development of e-commerce.

For a long time, China's economic rise depended on cheap raw materials and labor. However, since the 2008 global financial crisis, China suffered huge manufacturing challenges. China's economic growth had to turn back to focus on the field of domestic market, vast but not that rich. Nevertheless, coming back to the domestic market still faced a series of questions: How to find the target consumers? How to create the marketing channels? For some emerging companies or even traditional companies, the best option was e-commerce. In 2008, the scale of China's B2B e-commerce market transaction reached 2.96 trillion RMB, which created an increase of 39.4%. But compared to the 96.9% increase in 2006 and the 65.9% increase

in 2007, the annual growth rate of 2008 still sharply slowed down.¹This reduction of growth rate was also due to the significant reducing of consumer demand abroad caused by the financial crisis. In this period, as the biggest e-commerce company in China, Alibaba adopted a series of measures to cope with the changing economic environment, such as cooperating with the state-owned commercial banks to solve the loans problem of small and medium enterprises, as well as entering the B2B market in Japan and Indian. Singles' Day Sale was a relatively small part of Alibaba's marketing strategy, by contrast, which surprised everyone in the past few years. Jack Ma stated directly in a report that Singles' Day Sale was able to become a small engine to stimulate, wake, and lead China's domestic demand, which contained the huge economic opportunities of China.²

Actually, Jack Ma was right. Since its establishment, Singles' Day Sale is the peak of Chinese consumption practice every year. Obviously, the Chinese government also found the hope of economic recovery in E-commerce. In May 2011, the 12th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of China launched a policy to "develop e-commerce, improve e-commerce services for small and medium enterprises, and promote the building of credit service, online payment, logistics, and other supporting services for the public."³ In 2015, China's export continued to decline in investment, while consumption became the "stabilizer" of economic growth. The contribution of consumption to China's current economic growth has exceeded 60%. Facing the beautiful consumption data, both government and market investors

¹China SME B2B E-Commerce Research Report Brief Version [EB / OL]. [Http://www.iresearch.cn/](http://www.iresearch.cn/)

²"Singles' Day Sale: Festival for Entity as Well?" http://paper.people.com.cn/gjjrb/html/2015-11/16/content_1633249.htm

³"The Outline of the 12th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of China" the People's Republic of China, 2011, <http://ghs.ndrc.gov.cn/ghwb/gjwnggh/201109/P020110919590835399263.pdf>.

interpreted it as China's economic transformation, the “re-balancing”, from the mode of over-reliance on investment and export to the consumption mode. To reinforce the “stabilizer” role of consumption, the State Council of China believed that in order to get rid of the limitation of the expanding consumption, China needed to focus on creating new consumer needs, reforming institutional mechanisms, optimizing the consumption environment, and establishing a unified national credit information platform.

Keqiang Li, the Prime Minister of China, said, “Never consider e-commerce just as a ‘virtual economy’. In fact, it largely led directly to ‘real economy’, whether it is B2B, B2C or C2C.”⁴ Actually, two years ago, Singles’ Day Sale had already entered Keqiang Li’s sight. At that time, Jack Ma described Singles’ Day Sale as an unthinkable scene of the traditional business mode. Li responded approvingly: “you created a point of consumption.”⁵ Interestingly, along with the new consumption policy, 2015 Singles’ Day Sale reached a new record-breaking volume, which represented that the online consumption had already become the new economic growth point of China. At the same time, Jack Ma and his company became the national hero of China and China’s economy. However, what behind the narrative of national hero legend is the fact that Alibaba became one of the most valuable tech companies in the world. After raising \$25 billion from its U.S. IPO, Alibaba is ranking after the most well-known companies Apple, Google, and Microsoft, which are also known as the winners and beneficiaries of capitalism and consumerism.

4 Keqiang Li: Do Not Think E-commerce is Just a “Virtual Economy”. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-04/01/content_2841428.htm

5 Standing Committee of Singles’ Day Sale: Li Keqiang Adds Three “Fires” on Consumption. <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2015/11-11/7618434.shtml>

2.2. Cultural Perspective

In recent years, due to the rising commodity prices, labor costs and shrinking international demands, China's economy is facing the forced market transformation from overseas to domestic, which makes a great contribution to the construction of Chinese consumer society. The basic characteristic of consumer culture is that consuming behavior, replacing production practices, has become the main way the construction of people's identity. Baudrillard(1970:73) argued in *Consumer Society* that the objective of consumer society was training people to consume to maintain the monopoly of a certain economy system with highly developed productivity. Baudrillard considered consumption itself as a training mechanism, in which consumption was symbolized and became a communication system to categorize, control, and alienate people. When China entered into a consumer society, the superstition of the market also grew. In the meantime, collective consumption, happening during Spring Festival, National Day and so on, became more and more frequent. Especially after the blooming of online shopping, the opportunity to participate in consumption increased rapidly. However, with the help of technology, people haven't become more rational but irrational. The manufacture of more shopping festival, such as Singles' Day Sale is a result of the tide of online shopping.

In 2009, the first Singles' Day Sale on November 11 waved the flag of consumerism with a conspicuous slogan: "even if we don't have girlfriend or boyfriend, at least we can go shopping". This promotional slogan highlighted the symbol of "Single", which contained psychological and emotional factors and connected with the symbolic meaning of "shopping" (Fan, 2014:26). In that year, Alibaba had a great success. Therefore, Singles' Day Sale continues until now. It is not a haphazard that the e-

commerce giant Alibaba smelled the opportunities of Singles' Day. Market always pursues novelty. When subcultures produce some novel and confrontational conception, market will appropriate them in no time (Wang, 2014:25). Why do businesses create festival by themselves? Traditional events and festivals are fixed. In order to maximize their profits, it is necessary for businesses to create new consuming demands, just like some small shops will engage their own anniversaries. Let's concentrate on the date of Singles' Day Sale. November 11, which locates between the National Day sale and Christmas sale, is a good trade time between fall and winter. Unfortunately, there was no special event. Therefore, Singles' Day is a perfect concept for the creation of a new shopping festival. Moreover, Singles' Day is a good name with populist, joy, and drama, which may greatly stimulate young people's reflection, arouse their identities and lead them to a spree shopping. In *The Price*, Arthur Miller's(1968:54) play, there is a beautiful and profound quote: "Years ago a person, he was unhappy, didn't know what to do with himself---he'd go to church, start a revolution----something. Today you're unhappy? Can't figure it out? What is the solution? Go shopping." Single's Day Sale follows Miller's logic, the logic of capitalism and consumerism.

Chapter 3.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework: Hegemonic Femininity

According to Connell (1998), there is an unquestionable patriarchy in the world's gender order, which privileges men over women by unequal wages, unequal labor force participation, and a highly unequal structure of ownership, as well as cultural and sexual privileging. From the perspective between genders, masculinity holds hegemony upon femininity. Meanwhile, within a male perspective there still generally exists a hegemonic form of masculinity. The most honored or desired masculinity in a particular context is defined as "hegemonic masculinity" by Connell (1987). She argued that the hegemony contained by hegemonic masculinity upon other subordinated and marginalized masculinities, combining with the subordination of femininity, legitimates men's domination over women as a group. However, from the perspective of Connell, there are no femininities which are hegemonic. Because "all forms of femininity in this society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men" (Connell, 1987:187). Instead, she raised the definition of "emphasized femininity", which focused on the compliance of femininity to patriarchy.

Although Connell's study inspired a lot of gender scholars in their research of masculinity, as Schippers pointed out Connell's negation of hegemonic femininity limited the development of the research on the conceptualization of hegemonic femininity and

multiple femininities. Having noticed this problem, Schippers built a new model on the basis of Connell's work in *Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony*. Schippers (2007:86) pointed out that femininity has been defined as "other" contrasted to masculinity by outlining Connell's model of gender hegemony and multiple configurations of masculinity, and discussing conceptual and empirical difficulties with applying Connell's framework to femininity. With utilizing Butler's (1990) theory of the heterosexual matrix, Schippers offered us an alternative conceptual framework of hegemonic femininity for explaining how gender hegemony operates through masculinities and femininities, allowing for multiple configurations of femininity, to places men's dominance over women.

To understand Schippers's framework better, we should clarify the difference between Connell's and Butler's work. Connell's research on masculinities defined masculinity through its difference from femininity. Butler considered heterosexual desire as the defining feature for both women and men, which binds the masculine and feminine in a binary, hierarchical relationship (Budgeon, 2013:324). Inheriting the idea of Butler, Schippers (2007:90) articulated that the significance of masculinity and femininity in gender hegemony is based on their establishment of symbolic meanings for the relationship between women and men which provides the legitimating rationale for social relations to guarantee men' dominant position over women. At the same time, this legitimating rationale is "not just for embodiment and behavior by individuals but also for how to coordinate, evaluate, and regulate social practices, and therein lies their hegemonic significance."(Schippers, 2007:92) Through these discussions, Schippers distinguished masculinity and femininity, which are defined as contextually and culturally specific sets of meanings for what women and men are and should be, from the social

practice which served as the mechanism of how gender meanings shape, influence, and transform social structure.

With the establishment of the gender relationship, which is expressed through the quality content of femininity and masculinity, as the central feature of gender hegemony, we can find the space for the discourses on multiple configurations of masculinity and femininity and their implications for gender hegemony. Most important of all, this new model of gender hegemony offered us a conceptual space for hegemonic femininity. Schippers (2007) defined hegemonic femininity as a collection of the womanly characteristics, through which a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity was established and legitimated and the dominant position of men and the subordination of women were guaranteed. Following the description of the relationship between hegemonic femininity and hegemonic masculinity, Schippers also discussed the relationship between hegemonic femininity and other multiple femininities. She argued that

although the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity is one of ascendancy for the masculine and for men, there is, an ascendancy of hegemonic femininity over other femininities to serve the interests of the gender order and male domination.(Schippers, 2007:94)

Because of the gender hegemony is built on the symbolic construction of heterosexual matrix and men's superiority and social dominance over women, the characteristics of masculinity are forbidden to enacted by women. Except emphasizing of ideal femininity, women who embody masculinity will be defined as deviant and stigmatized to guarantee men's exclusive access to masculinity. With calling the features

of masculinity embodied by women “pariah femininities”, Schippers (2007:95) argued that women who enact pariah femininities will be considered as certain kinds of contaminated women and become undesirable, such as lesbian, bitch and “badass” girl, which are related to the features of feminine object, authority and being physically violent. To illustrate Schippers framework, I would like to bring in the example of Chinese women. In the feudal China, the obedient and uneducated woman was the hegemonic femininity at that time. Most of the women who were well educated or had literary and artistic talent were hookers with a lower social position. In other words, the feature of well-educated belonged to the set of hegemonic masculinity. When this feature was embodied by the female, it became a characteristic of pariah femininities.

When talking about the application of the framework, Schippers admitted there were different forms of masculinity and femininity in different cultures and in different periods of history, and the relationship in gender hegemony is dynamic in a specific context. Although the culturally specified characteristics of hegemonic masculinity vary in different societies or groups, their function of maintaining gender hierarchy and legitimating male dominance over female has remained quite stable.

3.2. Justification of the Case

As my research is about the production of hegemonic femininity in e-commerce of China, Singles’ Day Sale could be an ideal case for the following reasons:

First, the blooming of Singles’ Day Sale is built on the prosperity of e-commerce in China. In 2008, the number of Chinese Internet users surpassed the US’s, which was projected to reach 690 million 2017. China is also one of the fastest growing mobile

markets in the world, with approximately 451 million cellphone owners (To & Lai, 2014:22). All these made e-commerce become the most significant consumption phenomenon in China. In the meantime, as the top shopping festival of China's e-commerce, Singles' Day Sale became the biggest shopping festival domestic and overseas. Therefore, a case study on Singles' Day Sale is the most suitable one for a study in the context of e-commerce of China.

Second, the main target consumers of Taobao and Tmall, Alibaba's main shopping websites, are women. On May fifth, 2016, the first offline party of the Alibaba's top-level consumers, which are called "APASS", was held in Shanghai. The majority of these APASSes are female. So this party was also called the first offline party of the top women behind Jack Ma. "Women behind Jack Ma" is a nickname of the female consumers of Alibaba. What's more, to cater to the female consumer, Taobao and Tmall even adopted their own language style, a kind of feminine language communication strategy, between buyer and seller when they are doing business (Yang & Huang, 2015:44). In 2015 Singles' Day Sales, over 70% consumers are female between 23~35. As Alibaba's annual shopping festival and the annual peak of Alibaba's saleroom, Singles' Day Sale is an ideal case to investigate the relationship between women and consumerism in the realm of e-commerce in China.

In this essay, I will examine the construction of hegemonic femininity in e-commerce of China through a multimodal discourse analysis on the advertising, images, and caricatures about Singles' Day Sale. I choose images as my starting point because almost in every Singles' Day Sale, a certain type of pictures like figure 4, which contrasts "Bai Jia Niang Men" with "Sheng Qian Xi Fu", will spread wildly in my social network. At the beginning, I was naturally and completely convinced by these images and enjoyed

my shopping in the big sale. However, after I became a feminist, I have been feeling uncomfortable with the insinuation in them and decided to do some research on them. However, when I started my research and tried to collect more advertisements and posters as my samples, I found it hard to trace the images from the annual Singles' Day Sale events. The overwhelming promotional advertisement in every November 11 just disappeared after their bombardments over consumers like fireworks. While this situation is due to the rapid updating speed of network advertising, from my understanding it also reflects the bubbling nature of consumerism. As a result, in my operation of the multimodal discourse analysis on images about Singles' Day Sale, I will focus on two types of images. One type is the promotion advertisements of the shopping websites in Singles' Day Sale. For this type, I choose the official promotion posters from Tmall's 2015 Singles' Day Sale. Another type consists of images that are wildly spread in the social network during Singles' Day Sale. For this type I choose the contrasting images between "Bai Jia Niang Men" and "Sheng Qian Xi Fu" as samples.

3.3. Methodology: Multimodal discourse analysis

Kress & van Leeuwen are the first two scholars who proposed the concept of multimodal discourse analysis.. According to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), multimodal discourse analysis is the study of several semiotic modes or all of the various semiotic modes in a communicative event or in a text. The target of multimodal analysis is to explain and integrate the representational, interactive, and textual meanings realized by these different modes. It studies the way these semiotic modes put together to produce a consolidated text or a communicative event. Thus, if, traditional discourse analysis is more suitable for text language, then multimodal discourse analysis extends the study of

language to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, action, music, and sound (O'Halloran, 2004:1). MDA believes that symbolic language is another source of meaning. According to O'Halloran (2004:3), one of the reasons for the paradigmatic shift away from the study of language alone to the study of the integration of language with other resources is that along with the traditional discourse analysis's attempting to interpret the wide range of human discourse practices, the need to account for meanings arising from multiple semiotic resources deployed in various media, including contemporary interactive digital technologies, has become increasingly important.

On the basis of Halliday's (1978) research, Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) regarded image as social symbols and build a new analysis method of image, visual grammar, on the extension of linguistics meta-functions to the visual mode. In accordance with the three meta-functions of linguistics - ideational, interpersonal and textual - they created visual grammar, a new mode of image analysis which concentrates on representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meanings. By looking at the semiotic elements and structures of design - color, perspective, framing, and composition, they examined the ways in which images communicate meaning and demonstrate the differences and similarities between the grammar of language and that of visual communication. A brief analytical model of Kress & van Leeuwen's multimodal discourse analysis made by Yang Ting (2013:31) is showed below.

Image removed due to copyright

**Figure 1. A Brief Analytical Model of Multimodal Discourse Analysis
(Yang T,2013:31)**

In next section, I will examine the images of Singles' Day Sale primarily according to this model. However, considering space limitations, I will operate my analysis within the first two-step of this model. The first step involves the following three main aspects: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. The second step entails analyzing the elements under each meaning.

Chapter 4.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis on the Images about Singles' Day Sale

4.1. The Representational Meaning of Image

Kress & van Leeuwen (1996:45) define representational meaning as the ability of semiotic systems to represent objects and their relations in a world outside the representational system or in the semiotic systems of a culture. In *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, they divided images into two categories: narrative image and conceptual image, depending on the characteristics of the images. First, we should clarify that the term “participant” refers to the objects or persons in images. “Participants” can also be divided into two categories: represented participants--the participants in images, and interactive participants--the people in reality, in other words, the producers and viewers who can communicate through images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996:48). In a narrative image, the represented participants always display an ongoing action and event, a process of transformation or a momentary arrange. The most significant symbol of a narrative image is the vector, produced by the represented participants' interaction, such as an eye line or an oblique line. In conceptual images, such as tables or maps, for the reducing of the time factor, more stable aspects like categories, meaning or structure have a dominate position. There used to be no vectors in a conceptual image.

When examining the posters from Singles' Day Sale, we found that almost every advertisement about the sale was a narrative image, according to those categories. The following are two posters, which have already been signed with the vectors (red) of the eye lines and oblique lines.



Figure 2. Poster of Singles' Day Sale



Figure 3. Poster of 2015 Singles' Day Sale from Tmall

In figure 2, the slogan of the “11.11 Shopping Festival” is in the central part of the image. On the right side, we can see a young woman who bends her legs and bends over toward the slogan. This posture constitutes a vector toward the slogan showing the represented participant’s interest in the sale. Another vector is the eye line of the young woman. With a smile and two fingers touching her lips, the young woman is looking towards the outside of the image. In figure 3, the center of the poster is dominated by two walking young women. The young woman on the right side is pointing and looking at something outside the right side of the image with a surprised smile, and the one on the left is giving an approving glance at the same direction as the former young woman.

From these two images, we can clearly notice that both of them are displaying a non-transactional reaction process, which means the vectors in the image are formed by eye contacts rather than physical actions and there is no destination of the vectors (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). All the represented participants from the images show eye lines towards the outside of the picture and present positive mood with their expressions, which will inspire the viewers to wonder what they are looking at and thinking about. With the evocation of the views’ interest, a self-identity can be constructed between the represented participants and the viewers, especially when the viewers are female as well. In the meantime, all of these young women have ideal body types wearing delicate clothes and pretty faces with exquisite makeup which embodies the image of hegemonic femininity in China. As a consequence, consumption behavior could be rationalized as a factor of the ideal women.

4.2. The Interactive Meaning of Image

According to Kress & van Leeuwen (1996:122), the visual symbols in a certain image can establish the interaction between the producer and the viewer and reflect the social relation between them as well as the relation between represented participants and interactive participants. Research of the interactive meaning of image indicates that, there are four aspects of creating or maintaining the social relation between the viewers and the image: contact, social distance, attitude, and modality. With the combinational effect of these factors, viewers and image build a complex and subtle relation. In this section, the interactive meaning of a specific kind of images which is widely spread in Chinese social network during the Singles' Day Sale will be analyzed.



Figure 4. Comparison between “Bai Jia Niang Men” and “Sheng Qian Xi Fu”

The main idea of figure 4 is a comparison between women with different shopping habits. The women on the upper side are the representatives of “Bai Jia Niang Men”, which means the women who are prodigal on shopping especially on apparel and

accessories shopping. In contrast, the women on the bottom side represent the “Sheng Qian Xi Fu”, women who are frugal and good at money saving. In Chinese tradition, no matter in ancient times or Mao era, being diligent and thrifty is the virtue of Chinese people and it has been inherited through folktales and education. However, in the discourse of Singles’ Day Sale, the frugal women in these images no longer represent the virtues of China but a satire aimed at the consumption retardation of the frugal women, and they have also been considered as non-modern as well. On the other hand, prodigal shopping behavior is encouraged through these images. Furthermore, as “Jia” and “Xi Fu” relate to the context of family, both “Bai Jia Niang Men” and “Sheng Qian Xi Fu” emphasize the domestic role of women. Although the domestic element cannot be recognized from the images, the slogans just add the implication of domestic women upon these females. It is noteworthy that the domestic role of women is also a characteristic of hegemonic femininity in contemporary China. In the following, images within the four aspects of the interactive meaning will be discussed to explain how this sarcasm is constructed.

4.2.1. Contact

Contact constructs a kind of interactive relation, in most cases an imaginary relation, between the represented participants and the interactive participants. When analyzing the interactive meaning, Kress & van Leeuwen (1996:124) divided contact into two types in accordance with whether there is a direct or indirect eye contact between the represented participants and the viewers. When there is an eye contact, which will set up an indescribable relation between them, the image is a “demand” image. Through the eye contact, a particular social relation is established and the “demand” is transmitted through it. Otherwise, it is an “offer” image. In an offer image, we watch the

represented participant detachedly, as if they are displayed specimens offering some information.

In figure 4, we can clearly notice that the upper part and the bottom part represent different kinds of contact. All of the women in the upper part have direct eye contact with the viewers with graceful smiles. Just the opposite, none of the women in the bottom part has direct or indirect eye contact with viewers. Their expressions are obviously unpleasant, angry or numb. Through the “demand” images, we can receive the producers’ intention from the eye contact and the demand for identification. While in the “offer” images, we hardly feel the emotional connection with the represented participants which to some extent mean less identification. In addition, we can easily tell that the upper side women look like young women whose ages are around 30. On the contrary, the bottom ones look like elder women who are far more older than the upper ones. Since the majority of the consumers in Singles’ Day Sale are females between the age of 23~35, they can find their identities in “Bai Jia Niang Men” much more easily.

4.2.2. Social Distance

In multimodal discourse analysis, the distance between the visual elements and the viewers indicates different social relations. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:131) suggest that this distance should be used to convey a sense to the viewer of his or her social closeness in relation to the represented participants. These social relations are realized through the use of the frame sizes such as very close-up shots, close shots, medium close shots, medium shots, medium long shots long shots and very long shots. In magazines, films, TV programs, Internet or other visual resources, social distance is

widely used to express interactive meanings. The meaning of different frame sizes and social distances are summarized as following (Yang T, 2013:20).

Image removed due to copyright

**Figure 5. The Meaning of Different Frame Sizes and Social Distances
(Yang T, 2013:20)**

In figure 4, the profiles all of the represented participants are showed approximately at the waist, which signify that the frame size of these images is medium close. According to the information mentioned above, a medium close frame size is related to the “far personal” social relation, which has the implication of “one of us”. With this implication, the viewers could be more inclined to find self-identities in these images. At the same time, as there are two group of represented participants, a circumstance is constructed in which the viewers need to choose a group to identify themselves. Between the two images, which one to choose is an easy question for the female consumers in Singles’ Day Sale.

4.2.3. Perspective

Perspective, the choice of angles, can be used to express the interactive participants' subjective attitudes towards represented participants in visuals. Perspective can be divided into two possible simultaneous selections which they refer to as different degrees of involvement and power. There are two dimensions to consider in relation to images: the "horizontal" dimension, through which participants are presented frontally or obliquely, encodes the level of involvement between the interactive participants and the represented participants; and the "vertical" dimension, through which participants are presented from above, at eye level or from below, transmits power relationships between the represented participants and the viewer (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996:144).

From the horizontal dimension, in the left image, the upper side shows five young women facing us frontally gazing at the viewers which contains strong involvement like the viewers are a member of them. In the right image, although the "Bai Jia Niang Men" are posing obliquely, they turn their gaze at the viewers and form the eye contact like saying "Maybe you don't belong to our group but we make contact with you." Oppositely, in both images, the women in the bottom side are represented obliquely and look away from the viewers which send a message like "we are not in your world and we don't need to contact with you" to the viewers.

From the vertical dimension, most parts of the images choose eye level shots which mean the equal position between the represented participants and the interactive participants. In this situation, we prefer to interpret this eye level shot as offering an opportunity a free choice to the viewers, a choice of viewers' identification. Only the

bottom side of the right image uses a high-angle shot which could suggest the viewers' sense of superiority to the represented participants. In this unequal power situation between the represented participants and the viewers, the viewers' identification will be harder to build than a low-angle shot or an eye level shot.

4.2.4. Modality

The term modality comes from linguistics and systemic functional linguistics. It is regarded as the speaker's attitude towards the proposition expressed in a speech. The concept of modality is equally essential in the accounts of visual communication. Visuals can represent people, places and things as though they were real, as though they actually existed in this way, or as though they did not, as though they were imaginings, caricatures, etc. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:163), the dominant criterion for what is real and what is not based on not only appearance of objects, but also how much correspondence there is between what people can normally see and what people can see in a visual representation. In image analysis, the definition of modality changes a lot, referring to the degree of several image expression methods such as articulation of detail, contextualization, color saturation, color differentiation, image depth, illumination, and brightness.

In figure 4, the most significant factor of modality is the color differentiation. In the upper side of these images, the color differentiation is close to monochrome. The colors from each picture are less than four. On the contrary, the bottom side of the images maximally diversifies color range. From the perspective of modality, a higher color differentiation means higher modality and vice versa. In figure 4, the upper side images' lower color differentiation to some extent represents the ideal figure of Chinese women

which is not real for most Chinese females. However, the bottom images' higher color differentiation represents the reality world which is lack of attraction.

4.3. The Compositional Meaning of Image

In addition to the two dimensions of image analysis discussed in the preceding section, there is a third dimension called compositional meaning of images: the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to be relate to each other, and are integrated into a meaningful whole. The compositional meaning of images relates the representational and interactive meanings of the picture to each other through three interrelated systems: Information value, Saliency, and Framing. (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) In this section, the following poster from Tmall's Singles' Day Sale advertisements will be analyzed from the perspective of the compositional meaning of image.



Figure 6. Poster of 2015 Singles' Day Sale from Tmall

4.3.1. Information Value

Information value can be achieved by analyzing the spatial distribution of visual elements in visual communication. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:181), spatial arrangements can be classified into three major patterns in visual grammar: left and right, top and bottom, center and margin. Generally speaking, when the horizontal axis is made significant use of in images, usually the elements placed on the left are presented as given, the elements placed on the right as new. In images structured along the vertical axis, if certain constituent elements are placed in the upper part, and other different elements in the lower part, then what has been placed on the top is presented as the Ideal, what has been placed at the bottom as the Real. A third aspect of information value of note here is the importance of the central spaces and outer edges in images and multimodal texts. In Center--Margin distribution, the semiotic mode placed in the center represents the core of information, which gives the meaning to the other elements around (which act in response to the center).

In figure 6, although there are two slogans consisting a top and bottom arrangement, the most significant structure is a center-margin arrangement consisted by a female sitting on the sofa, while a large variety of products surrounded her radially. According to the theory of information value, the red-dressed female is the core information in this image. She gives the meaning to all the products around her, while the existence of all these commodities is to respond to her demand. Even the slogans of "Singles' Day Sale is coming", "Buy what in and out of your mind", and "6 million goods for your" are in the margin part related to the woman like serving her desire. Through this

arrangement, the Singles' Day Sale is represented as a creation for female and female is the center of consumption.

4.3.2. Saliency

Besides the relative spatial distribution of various elements in the visual discourse and the information value accorded to them, different degrees of saliency also play an important role in compositional meaning. Saliency means some certain features are made to be outstanding and noticeable in a composition. Saliency can be realized by size, contrasts in color, tone, foreground and background, overlap and so on. (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996:212)

In figure 6, the saliency of the image must be the red-dressed woman. We can tell her saliency role through several factors. First, although the size of her figure is not very big in this picture, she occupies the central part of the image. Second, she is the center of a radial structure which makes her more significant. Furthermore, contrasted with the dark red background and the white furniture, the bright red dress she wears shows the most vivid color in this image. In addition, there are two spotlights over her head and they light up the area she sits. All these factors mentioned above make her the saliency of the image and emphasize female's central position of Singles' Day Sale.

4.3.3. Framing

The third important element is framing. It uses the dividing lines to connect or separate elements in an image, revealing whether the elements belong together or not. Framing refers to "the degrees of connectedness or boundedness provided by an actual frame or frame lines around a whole visual, or around the elements in a visual." (Kress

and van Leeuwen, 1996:177). There are six categories of framing: segregation, separation, integration, overlap, rhyme, and contrast. Framing works in combination with information value and the different degrees of salience organized within visuals.

In figure 6, there are two noteworthy kinds of the framing. The first one is the frame consisted by the woman and the products. As we can see, the woman sitting on the sofa is on the central platform of the products, which means there is no actual boundary or empty space between them. This kind of frame is called integration. The frame of integration usually represents the strong connection between the elements. In this situation, it indicates the strong relation between the woman and the goods. It looks like a saying "shopping is the nature of women". The other one is the frame consisted by the image and the slogan. As they are separated by empty space, they form a separation frame. Separation shows that the elements are similar in some respects and different in others. We can argue that, the separation frame emphasizes the inner relations between Singles' Day Sale and female consumers which will strongly appeal female to joining the sale and make them treat shopping as one of their characters.

Chapter 5.

Discussion

5.1. Construction of Consumption as a Characteristic of Hegemonic Femininity

Through the multimodal discourse analysis on images of Singles' Day Sale, several characteristics of contemporary Chinese hegemonic femininity can be identified, such as skinny body shape, bright and clean skin tone, exquisite makeup and elegant dressing. However, among these characters, there lays a more significant but obscure one, consumption itself as a characteristic of hegemonic femininity. Images like “Bai Jia Niang Men” add the consumption elements to the image of ideal women directly and establish the superiority of shopping women through uglification of other multiple femininities. Meanwhile, some other advertising implies the dominance of the consuming female through more veiled ways. In the e-commerce realm of China, along with the prosperity of online shopping, these images that convey hegemonic femininity with consumption characteristic can be found easily. However, although the consumption elements in hegemonic femininity are prevailing in the consumerism society of modern China, just a decade ago Chinese hegemonic femininity is not the same situation, ever more different in Mao's era and in ancient China.

The hegemonic femininity of Chinese female goes through a series of changes in history. Since slave society, the patriarchal system began to form and the feudal

patriarchal system was gradually developed and consolidated. Along with these shifts, a male-centered social system has been founded through a series of ethics and customs, and the female became subordinate to male (Yang H, 2013:14). In Chinese tradition, the hegemonic femininity is described as “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” which emphasizes the compliance and chastity of women. In Mao’s era, the hegemonic femininity can be summarized in one slogan “women holds up half the sky”. The proper image of woman in Mao’s era, was illustrated in official magazines such as the China Reconstructs and China Pictorial, as worker or peasant who wore plain, genderless clothes with no ornamentation or jewelry (Hung, Li & Belk, 2005). In the late 20th and early 21st century, under economic reform and opening-up policy, the emerging market forces promote the representation of hegemonic femininity in ways that recall the Confucian conduct of the virtuous wife and good mother. It is achieved through using the narration of women as bourgeois housewives and mothers who cook, clean, and pine for the well-being of their husbands and children (Ferry, 2003:284).

Then there came the e-commerce era, most young women no longer feel shame but proud to call themselves as “Bai Jia Niang Men”. In traditional China, both “Bai Jia”(prodigal) and “Niang Men”(disparaging names of women) are negative words. The prevalent trend of calling themselves “Bai Jia Niang Men” and the uglification of “Sheng Qian Xi Fu” shows a resistance of Chinese female on the traditional social image of Chinese female and their emphasis on the individual role. However, unlike the resistances from other subcultures, the phenomenon of “Bai Jia Niang Men” has been incorporated into capitalism’s forces, and even worse, this phenomenon is directly or indirectly made by consumerism.

With the analysis of different hegemonic femininities in different eras of China, I argue that what behind this transformation of hegemonic femininity in China are the combined effects of economy and state policy. For example, considering the "masculinized woman" as an ideal image of women in Mao's era was in line with China's high accumulation and low consumption development strategy (Song, 2012:108). Speaking of the dominant position of shopping women in e-commerce era, the 2008 global financial crisis and China's policy of stimulating domestic demand are the major causes of this trend. But besides the relationship between hegemonic femininity and the economy and policy, consumerism is involved in it as a bridge. Just as what I demonstrate in the section of the development of Singles' Day Sale, this big sale is also a production of contemporary Chinese economy and policy. From this perspective, the hegemony of the shopping women is a derivative of consumerism which is embodied by Singles' Day Sale and respond to the 2008 global financial crisis.

5.2. Hegemonic Femininity as Guidance to Female's Purchasing Behaviors

Not only being constructed as a characteristic of hegemonic femininity, consumption also participates in maintaining other elements of hegemonic femininity through other means both visibly and invisibly. As I mentioned above, the image of ideal women in contemporary China is consist of elements like bright and clean skin, exquisite makeup, and elegant dressing which are exactly related to the consumption of skincare, makeup and apparel. Moreover, the roles as good wife and mother also implicate the meanings of consumption for themselves and even their family. In order to achieve hegemonic femininity, women have to learn to use a wide range of ways to "beautify"

their bodies following the fashion trend of body shape, clothing and makeup. While the images of shopping women encourages female consumers to purchase products to become “ideal” women, the images also give them guidance on what to buy.

This remunerative logic of hegemonic femininity is created and shared by the combination of consumerism and patriarchy. On one hand, “China’s consumerism is based on gender difference and a clear identification of marked femaleness or maleness ” (Ferry, 2003:285). Although consumerism affects both men and women, the latter is more impressionable because they constitute the major part of consumers for which the majority of products are advertised as well as the most common representation in advertising (Hooper 1998:74). From this perspective, women are ideal or even “natural” targets for consumerism. To some extent, identified as “natural” consumers, Chinese women’s subject is further split and falls into fetish crisis and loses consciousness (Lin, 2013:126). On the other hand, although the abundant and various commodities have offered female more choices, the hegemonic femininity which is guiding their choices is mostly constructed by patriarchy to satisfy male’s aesthetics and demand. What’s worse, the more choices female have, the more “natural” they are identified as consumers.

5.3. The Concealment of the Productive Role of Chinese Women by Hegemonic Femininity

After the superficial and analytical explanation of the constructed hegemonic femininity in e-commerce in the realm of China, I want to unveil the deep-seated influence of the consumerist stigma on Chinese female--the producer role of Chinese female is concealed by the consumer role and the hegemonic femininity is the

accomplice of this process. In the traditional perspective, production is regarded as positive and masculine, whereas consumption as passive and feminine (Hung, Li & Belk, 2005). In a more radical consumerism society such as nowadays China, sometimes, consumption is even described as the natural role of women. In fact, Chinese women play a significant role in productive practices. According to Chinese Sixth National Census in 2010, Chinese women's employment rate was up to 61%. Female employers accounted for 44.7% in the workplace. In some fields of tertiary industry such as retail, health care and customer service, female had accounted for the majority.⁶

The interpretation of female's consumer identity, not only denies the significant role of female in productive activities, but also strengthens the conflicts between workplace and family and may limit female's productive practices as their 'natural' areas. The result of the analysis on the female images in Chinese advertising shows that Chinese women are under discrimination from four aspects in advertising: First, the advertising define the values of women in their appearance, age, body shape and etc. Second, the limitation of women's living area within the family and their prevalent role as wife and mother. Third, the representation of the relationship between women and men in a male-centric narration. Fourth, in advertising, women's intelligence is limited and degraded through the expression of the pursuit of fashion, love, and entertainment (Liu & Bu, 1997:55). These four types of discrimination actually constitute the major image of hegemonic femininity in nowadays China. However, these images are far away from the facts of Chinese women's political, economic and cultural status in the real world.

⁶ Chinese Sixth National Census, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm>.

I regard hegemonic femininity as an accomplice of the concealment of Chinese female's producer role, because when consumption is embodied in hegemonic femininity, the consumer role will be rationalized and glorified. Nancy Fraser (2000) defined the negative perception of women as misrecognition. Misrecognition is not only a cultural harm but also promote the establishment of an institutionalized social relationship of subordination. To put it bluntly, the misrecognition of the consumption nature of women will lead to a decline of women's status. As more and more women spontaneously call themselves "Bai Jia Niang Men", they take the identity of consumer as granted without noticing their status crisis. Some women even regard their strengthened purchasing power as a revival of feminism. However, although female consumers play a significant role in the process of the accumulation of capital, most Chinese women are seen as economically dependent on men and denigrated to a subordinate position to patriarchy (Meng, 2015). Ultimately, with the assistance of hegemonic femininity, Chinese female's producer role is weakened and their subordination to male is maintained.

Chapter 6.

Conclusion

As the biggest shopping festival in China and all over the world, Singles' Day Sale offers Chinese female a daylong carnival of shopping which can also be seen as an epitome of contemporary China's consumerism. However, the role of the major participants in the big sale and the huge volume of transaction never improve Chinese female's position in the economic, political and cultural life in Chinese society. From my study, the emergence and development of Singles' Day Sale is a product of the combination between China's marketing strategy (responding to global financial crisis) and the flourishing of consumerism in e-commerce of China. Meanwhile, this combination also influence the construction of the hegemonic femininity in the context of e-commerce era. After the multimodal discourse analysis on the images from Singles' Day Sale, I found that consumption has already been assimilated as one of the elements of Chinese hegemonic femininity which are represented through the images apparently or obliquely. Moreover, the constructed hegemonic femininity not only encourages Chinese female to become a "Bai Jia Niang Men", but also guide them to buy and become the "ideal" women which is shaped by Chinese paternity. More seriously, veiled by the gorgeous image of hegemonic femininity, the producer role of Chinese female is covered by the consumer role and in this way Chinese male's dominance over female is maintained.

However, there are also some limitation of my research. First, collecting the samples is a challenge. Because of the instantaneity of online shopping advertising, collecting the advertisements from annual Singles' Day Sale is not easy. Even the advertisements from 2015 Singles' Day Sale are rare. As a result, the available images for analysis are limited. Second, although hegemonic femininity is a valuable conception, there still lays some limitation. The most significant one in the contemporary context of China is the absence of class. No matter how prosperous the consumerism is, the huge population of the rural area in China stands quietly in the shadow of it, moreover, they are usually selected to represent as negative examples, such as "Sheng Qian Xi Fu" and even uglified. However, in 2015 Singles' Day Sale, with the flag of globalization, Alibaba also launched the program of "Thousands of Villages and Countries", which has already docked with 27 provinces and set up 5870 pilot projects in the rural area of China. Will consumerism land in rural area successfully? Will nowadays "Bai Jia Niang Men" be popular in rural China? These should be questioned for further research.

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