

WOMEN'S RECEPTION OF MALE CELEBRITIES IN BEAUTY ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Chinese female consumers interpret portrayals of male celebrities in gynocentric beauty advertising, contributing to research on femvertising and inclusive advertising. Drawing on reader response theory, audience reception theory, and feminist literary criticism, it explores how male objectification is decoded in a marketplace shaped by postfeminist consumer culture and authoritarian cultural governance. Findings reveal that empowerment in Chinese femvertising is profoundly ambivalent. Women derive agency, pleasure, and moral affirmation through their readings, yet these responses are entangled with patriarchal expectations and state-endorsed gender norms. Three interpretive patterns emerge: *infantilization*, where care-based authority reinforces traditional role divisions; *romanticized submission*, where fantasies of elite masculinity offer affective gratification but reaffirm classed hierarchies; and *gender boundary policing*, where selective tolerance toward male beauty exposes the limits of inclusivity. These dynamics illuminate how desire, morality, and relational politics intertwine to produce culturally specific forms of “ambivalent empowerment”. The study advances a culturally nuanced understanding of transformative advertising, positioning empowerment not as a universal ideal but as a localized, morally inflected relational discourse shaped by gender norms, state ideology, and shifting consumer desires and subjectivities.

Keywords: Femvertising, Masculinity, Audience Reception, Ambivalent Empowerment, Transformative Advertising

Women's Reception of Male Celebrities in Beauty Advertising

In recent years, we have started to witness the strategic use of male celebrities as beauty brand ambassadors to target female consumers in the Chinese marketplace (Li 2020; Yu 2024). This market trend is often deliberated as a direct effect of the “She Economy”, which underlines the growing economic power, cultural presence, and market influence of women, especially single women (Morgan Stanley 2019). A recent report from Accenture highlights China as the home to nearly 400 million female consumers between the ages of 20 and 60 (Nan 2024). With yearly expenditures of up to 10 trillion yuan, or over \$1.4 trillion, these women constitute a market size that is equivalent to the combined retail markets of Germany, France, and the UK. To gain a share of this lucrative female market, advertising agencies are increasingly reimagining conventional gender portrayals through “femvertising”, advertising that explicitly speaks to women’s empowerment (Iqbal 2015).

A defining trend of femvertising in China is the rise of “Nan Se” consumption (literally “male beauty”), which channels the female gaze toward the commodification and objectification of men (cf., Li 2020). This is often packaged in forms of soft masculinity, exemplified by the popularity of “little fresh meat”—young male celebrities whose desirability lies in their youth (“little”) and aesthetic appeal (“fresh meat”) (Yu, Sandel, and Chan 2025; Yu and Sui 2023). Crucially, the female gaze here is more than a reversal of Mulvey’s (2013) concept of the male gaze, where women are portrayed as passive objects (also see Oliver 2017). Instead, it foregrounds relationality, affect, and aesthetics (cf., Stern 1993), providing a lens through which women reinterpret gender politics and make sense of their own embodied desires (Li 2020; Liang 2022). Advertising images of “little fresh meat” thus reconfigure, rather than subvert, traditional masculinity, representing hybrid identities that invite women’s emotional and imaginative engagement.

Yet, the popularity of these figures brings about a culturally charged tension with the party-state's views on gender roles, which remain deeply entrenched in Confucian patriarchal structures (Fincher 2014; Yang 2022). While the rise of the She economy has turned delicate male beauty into a commodity to attract female audiences, the state has simultaneously sought to promote stronger, heteronormative masculinities, cracking down on the proliferation of effeminate male images (Song 2022). Recent regulatory actions, such as the Cyberspace Administration's watchlist of male celebrities deemed "too effeminate", reflect broader anxieties about the "feminization" of male youth and the state's effort to reaffirm conventional gender ideology and national strength (Hu and Guan 2021).

In sum, we are seeing a fundamental ideological clash between commercially appealing images of male beauty and state-sanctioned constructions of ideal Chinese manhood. While the market celebrates "Nan Se" consumption to appeal to women's emotional and aesthetic desires (Li 2020), the state censors such representations as part of an ideological project to tackle "crisis of masculinity" (Yu and Sui 2023). This raises critical questions about the role of the state in shaping gender identity politics, market dynamics, and women's interpretive agency. Are women empowered and given new forms of cultural recognition through "Nan Se" consumption in Chinese femvertising? Or, are they navigating repackaged gender norms mediated by state ideology (Yan 2010; Yang 2022)? To address these questions, we integrate insights from reader response (Belk 2017; Scott 1994), audience reception (Schröder 2000) and feminist criticism (Stern 1993) to examine how Chinese female consumers engage with male-led gynocentric beauty advertising. This study contributes to a culturally nuanced understanding of inclusive and transformative advertising (Gurrieri, Zayer, and Coleman 2022) by highlighting how gendered desire, aesthetic boundaries, and relational politics intersect under a (semi-)authoritarian state, producing culturally specific interpretations of masculinity and female empowerment in contemporary Chinese media.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Femvertising, Gendered Bodies, and Celebrity Culture

Femvertising has emerged as a powerful advertising practice that aspires to challenge traditional gender roles and promote inclusivity (Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen 2017), often serving as vehicle for social change (Adalı et al. 2025; James 2025; Zayer, Coleman, and Gurrieri 2023). However, its transformative potential remains contested, as critics argue that femvertising frequently reproduces the sexualization of women's bodies rather than dismantling it (McRobbie 2008; Windels et al. 2020).

In Western markets, femvertising is heavily body-centered, particularly in fashion and beauty industries. Dove's #RealBeauty campaign celebrates all body shapes, CoverGirl's #IAmWhatIMakeUp advocates beauty regardless of age, Billie's #ProjectBodyHair destigmatizes female body hair, and Lane Bryant's #ThisBodyIsMadeToShine promotes plus-size body positivity. These examples underscore how even progressive messaging often foregrounds the female body as the primary site of empowerment.

By contrast, Chinese femvertising increasingly shifts from body-centered representations toward narratives of selfhood and agency that resonate with the consumer subjectivities emerging in the She Economy (Morgan Stanley 2019). Campaigns such as SK-II's *Marriage Market Takeover* (challenging the stigma of "leftover women"), NEIWAI's *No Body Is Nobody* (normalizing scars and aging), Proya's *Gender Does Not Divide Us, Prejudice Does!* (highlighting individuals defying gender roles) emphasize authenticity and subjectivity rather than overt bodily display (Yue 2023).

The dynamics shift, however, when Chinese femvertising incorporates male celebrities in women's fashion and beauty advertising. Here, brands position women as the active subjects

of the gaze, while male idols such as Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan are styled to embody a soft, aesthetically pleasing masculinity that caters to women's fantasies and desires (Li 2020). This strategy allows women to claim subjectivity through the consumption of male beauty, though it primarily serves commercial ends rather than functioning as a feminist intervention (Song 2022).

Unlike in the West, where fashion houses like Gucci, Alexander McQueen, and Fendi, and celebrities such as Harry Styles (Elan 2020), have explicitly embraced androgyny as a political stance to challenge binary gender norms (Stevens and Ostberg 2020), Chinese femvertising operates within a state-capitalist framework where subversions are tightly policed. Political and ideological agendas promote masculinity tied to social stability, national strength, and heteronormativity (Hu and Guan 2021; Yu and Sui 2023). As such, femvertising in the Chinese media landscape becomes less a site of radical gender disruption than a terrain shaped by national identity, Confucian patriarchy, and market imperatives (cf., Zayer and Coleman 2015).

Against this backdrop, our study examines how young Chinese women respond to male-led gynocentric beauty advertisements, positioning "Nan Se" consumption as a key strategy for selling women's cosmetics (Li 2020). While often framed as empowerment, such campaigns also make visible how women actively participate in reshaping representations of Chinese masculinity, asserting influence over its portrayal and opening limited space for alternative gender norms (Li 2020; Song and Hird 2013). Insights into how such gendered advertising discourses are encoded and received, we argue, are particularly fruitful for gender scholars investigating the transformative power of advertising (Gurrieri et al. 2022). The next section outlines the framework we use to analyse the encoding and women's reception of male-led gynocentric beauty advertising in China.

Bridging Reader Response, Audience Reception, and Feminist Criticism

Imagine an ad not simply being watched, but actively analyzed and interpreted, like a book whose reader brings their own life experiences to its pages. This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework that combines Reader Response Theory (RAT), Audience Reception Theory (ART), and feminist literary criticism to examine how female audiences engage with male-led gynocentric beauty ads in China.

Reader Response Theory provides a foundation for understanding advertising as a textual form that necessitates complex, context-driven interpretive acts. As Scott (1994) states, advertisements function as a bridge from text to mind, inviting consumers not only to absorb information but to infer facts and co-create meaning by filling narrative gaps and interpreting symbolic codes (e.g., images, drama, metaphor and music), through the recognition of aspects of the self within the text (p. 472). In this sense, advertising does not transmit fixed meanings but instead stimulates an active negotiation between the textual proposition and the beliefs and experiences of the reader. Belk (2017) similarly emphasizes how qualitative advertising research rooted in reader response can illuminate consumers' subjective, emotional, and symbolic engagements with ads, rather than treating them as passive recipients of persuasion. Together, these insights situate advertisements as textual invitations that elicit interpretive labor from audiences, focusing on how ads are 'read' by consumers (e.g., textual, narrative strategies).

Audience Reception Theory, while related, places greater emphasis on how audiences interpret and respond to these invitations in real life contexts. Hall's (2010) influential Encoding-Decoding model and its later refinements (Morley 2006; Ross 2011; Schröder 2000), conceptualize audiences as socially situated actors who decode advertising messages in relation to their identities, cultural backgrounds, and ideological orientations. Consumers

may align with, negotiate, or resist advertising messages, underlining the socially embedded nature of meaning-making. Schröder's (2000) multidimensional model of mass media reception further operationalizes this complexity by introducing six dimensions of audience engagement: *motivation* (how the text motivates receiver engagement), *comprehension* (how the receiver understands the text and its semiotics), *discrimination* (how the receiver takes an immersive or critical stance towards the text), *position* (receiver's subjective perspective on the perceived textual position), *evaluation* (the analyst evaluates the ideological implications of audience readings of a text) and *implementation* (how audience readings influence their social practice and obtain political value). These interlinked dimensions showcase that meaning-making is not only ideologically driven, but also shaped by affective, epistemological, and ontological factors, providing a more comprehensive guide to systematically analyze and interpret audience data from qualitative advertising research.

Given the study's focus on gendered readers, feminist theory serves as a crucial analytical lens to investigate how male-led gynocentric beauty ads are engaged by women in China. Inspired by Stern's (1993) feminist literacy criticism, this lens identifies how the patriarchal and binary tensions are often encoded in advertising discourse (Fowler, Das, and Fowler 2022). Stern observes that female readers often prioritize the tale over the teller (e.g., talk on how the tale reminds them of similar circumstances in their own life), interact with ads on a relational and emotional level, empathize with characters in stories, and deduce meanings rather than demanding precise clarity. Applying this lens to advertising reveals how female audiences actively experience, redefine or push back against specific forms of gender representation embedded in media texts—be it with idealized/toxic masculinities, the weight of societal expectations, or feminist social movements.

In sum, both RRT and ART recognize that audiences are active and interpretive agents who bring their own experiences, identities, and emotions into reading, decoding and

responding to ads. Within postfeminist consumer culture, where individual choice, emotional gratification and aesthetic consumption are key to empowerment (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2004). A feminist analytical lens allows for a critical exploration of how male-led gynocentric beauty advertisements are read not merely as visual texts but as contested sites of gender identity politics. The interplay between gendered bodies, symbolic codes, and aesthetic registers produces readings that are simultaneously interpretive, relational, and culturally situated, offering a window onto the contradictions, ambiguities, and layered emotional responses embedded in contemporary gender advertising.

METHODOLOGY

Depth Interviews

This study examines how young Chinese women engage with “Nan Se” consumption in gynocentric beauty ads featuring male celebrities. Using a snowball sampling approach, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 16 female participants aged 23–29. This age cohort grew up during a period of rising feminist discourse and gender inclusivity debates in China (Wang 2021), making them especially attuned to gender representation and the target audience of femvertising. Women in this age range also make up the largest consumer segment in China’s beauty and personal care market, accounting for nearly 40% of total users (Ou 2024), and they are more likely to purchase beauty products via online channels (Freedman 2023). In addition, the participants were primarily based in either Tier 1 (i.e., megapolises, e.g., Beijing, Guangzhou) or Tier 2 cities (i.e., major economic and cultural hubs but on a smaller scale, e.g., Fuzhou, Yantai), ensuring both geographic diversity and a cosmopolitan outlook, suggesting openness to international and domestic beauty brands alongside a capacity for critical evaluation. They represented varied occupations and had

between four to fifteen years of beauty consumption experience (see Table 1). Their product use, digital literacy, and familiarity with male celebrities and popular discourses made them ideal respondents to reflect on both the symbolic and emotional dimensions of gendered advertising, especially with reference to “Nan Se” consumption.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

To explore these perspectives in depth, we employed a three-phase interview design consisting of rapport building, perception elicitation, and critical reflection. Each interview started with grand tour questions that would put the participants at ease (e.g., what are your hobbies?), followed by macro-level questions on their broader perceptions of “Nan Se” (e.g., ideal traits, celebrity personas) in contemporary China. Finally, participants were asked to critically reflect on the selected ads presented (see next section), including their visual and semiotic elements as well as perceived affective and gendered implications.

The first author conducted all interviews in Mandarin, six conducted in person and ten via video call, to minimize communication barriers and enhance the depth, clarity, and cultural resonance of the data. The shared gender identity between the interviewer and the participants further facilitated a heightened sense of relatedness and trust, especially around intimate and gendered topics (Fontana and Frey 2005). Data collection included 16 interviews, ten conducted in June and July 2024, and six in February and March 2025 to explore emerging themes. Saturation was reached around the 13th interview, but all were completed to ensure thematic comprehensiveness. Each interview lasted between 50 and 120 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed, resulting in a textual document of approximately 172,140 words and 689 double-spaced pages (if translated into English). Participants shared relationship fantasies, embodied desires, and views on queer masculinity, offering insights rarely shared in Chinese public discourse.

To ensure ethical integrity and participant well-being, this research obtained approval from the Lancaster University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster University Management School Research Ethics Committee (Reference: FASSLUMS-2025-5890-DataOnly-1). All participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was maintained throughout transcription, analysis, and reporting.

Ad Selection

To ensure the selected ads were both culturally relevant and analytically rich for evaluating femvertising, we included four male-led gynocentric beauty ads featuring prominent male idol (Chan, Leung Ng, and Luk 2013), aged between 27 and 33 with verified Weibo follower counts of 10 to 90 million (as of March 2025)¹. The ads promote products ranging from traditional skincare (e.g., essence) to entry-level items (e.g., cushion foundation, perfume) and to visible cosmetics (e.g., lipstick, lip gloss). Each ad, 16 to 36 seconds long, featured high-budget production, strong visual storyline, sophisticated editing, and clear aesthetic cues. The chosen celebrities embodied diverse constructions of “Nan Se” consumption, from *conventional ruggedness* (Jackson Wang) to *softness* (Xiao Zhan), *sexualization* (Wang Yibo) and *androgyny* (Zhou Shen), while endorsing either Western or Eastern brands (see Table 2). The selection allows an exploration of how female audiences interpret the ads’ semiotic layers and negotiate shifting masculinities in contemporary Chinese gender politics (see Appendix 1).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

¹ After initially reviewing six ads, we focused on four (Xiao Zhan, Wang Yibo, Zhou Shen, Jackson Wang) that best showcased diverse masculinities and elicited rich audience reflections, making the dataset easier to digest without compromising the richness of our findings.

Analysis and Interpretation

Grounded in a feminist analytical lens, this study integrated reader response and audience reception theory (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2004; Stern 1993) to examine women's reception of male-led beauty advertising. We conducted a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts, focusing on how participants actively interpreted, negotiated and emotionally engaged with the ads through their own social, cultural, and subjective positions. The analytic process unfolded in two stages. First, we summarized what participants said in their own terms, tracing how they associated visual and stylistic elements, such as makeup, clothing, gaze, posture, and tone of voice, with particular constructions of men. We then undertook a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) to interpret the emotional, relational, and ideological significance of these readings. Synthesizing these interpretations and examining points of tension enabled us to identify the core ambivalences within the data.

Across accounts, participants often shifted between accepting, negotiated, and oppositional readings of the ads (Ross 2011), yet their interpretations consistently clustered around five discursive constructions of masculinity: *gentle/soft masculinity* (mentioned by 15 participants), *seductive masculinity* (15), *androgynous masculinity* (9), *noble masculinity* (8), and *business elite masculinity* (7). These categories illustrate a decoding spectrum through which masculinity is rendered hybrid, fluid, and at times contradictory, especially when expressed through in fantasy and desire. Recognizing how participants positioned themselves in relation to various forms of masculinity, as desiring subjects, as consumers, or as critics, allowed for a more critical understanding of the media and cultural socialization processes (e.g., TV dramas, idol culture, and fandom discourse) shaping their readings (Schröder 2000). Building on this, we applied a feminist analytical framework (Fowler et al. 2022; Stern 1993) to interrogate the metaphors and ideological codes through which participants negotiated,

reproduced, or contested gendered hierarchies and notions of female empowerment embedded in the ads.

Appendix 1 details an overview of how the combined analytical approach is implemented in this study, revealing how young Chinese women seek to gain empowerment through their consumer choice, romantic desire, and relational fantasies. It also sheds light on how they navigate the ambivalent Chinese cultural landscape of postfeminism to negotiate preferred expressions of masculinity and gender relations.

FINDINGS

Our analysis shows that women's interpretations of male portrayals in gynocentric beauty advertising are shaped by ambivalent forms of empowerment. Participants expressed agency, pleasure, and critique in ways that both challenged and reproduced prevailing gender hierarchies. This ambivalence unfolded through three patterns of empowerment: infantilization, romanticized submission, and gender boundary policing. Together, as we show in the sections that follow, these themes reveal how desire, moral judgment, and relational politics converge in women's decoding processes, rendering empowerment in Chinese femvertising simultaneously affective, fragile, and constrained.

Ambivalent Empowerment through Infantilization

Postfeminism is characterized by a unique sensitivity that upholds neoliberal thoughts of personal empowerment and consumption, yet often does so within contradictory discourses that simultaneously reaffirm conventional gender roles (Rome, O'donohoe, and Dunnett 2020). This ambivalence is evident in Bei Bei and Ting Ting's reactions to the soft

masculinity embodied by Chinese male celebrities such *Xiao Zhan*² and *Zhou Shen*³ in women's cosmetics ads.

Bei Bei: *Xiao Zhan in the Nars ad feels like a non-aggressive Xiao Nai Gou ("milky puppy") boyfriend, with his friendly smile and innocent eyes that don't try to 'read' you [overinterpret what you do] and you want to pet him... Well, some guys or even our national media might criticize it [the milky puppy image] for not being masculine enough, but it's a quality that many girls like.* (Age 28, civil servant)

Ting Ting: *Using male celebrities to endorse cosmetics actually conveys a sense of delicacy and refinement, and some people might even perceive it as effeminate...it could be seen as a challenge to hegemonic masculinity. Masculine, rough, and powerful...Zhou Shen comes across as a lovely, innocent, gentle, and non-aggressive little boy (in the Florasis Silkworm Powder Compact ad). His facial expressions are very soft, without any hint of an aggressive gaze... I perceive him as if he were my own child, feeling the urge to pat his head and a strong desire to protect him from harm...it makes me think of cosmetics as very gentle products, ones that won't irritate the skin, won't cause any harm, and are also very delicate and fragile* (Aged 23, Freelancer)

In these comments, male celebrities are fantasized as "*Xiao Nai Gou*" or "children", figures stripped of threat, sexual charge, and authority. "*Xiao Nai Gou*" is a widely used slang term in contemporary Chinese media and online discourse describing young men who are

² Xiao Zhan – NARS: Xiao Zhan is often portrayed as versatile and photogenic, alternating between sharp, chiseled looks and soft, approachable expressions. Popular media embraces him for his flawless skin and emotional presence, which aligns well with NARS' dualistic black-and-white cushion foundation campaign, moving from intense gazes to warm smiles.

³ Zhou Shen – Florasis: Zhou Shen is celebrated for his ethereal, delicate appearance and gentle charisma. Media often highlights his androgynous charm, unique high-pitched voice and artistic aura, which complements Florasis' campaign of traditional elegance, featuring tea-drinking and guzheng-playing scenes that emphasize grace, softness, and warmth.

emotionally responsive, gentle, clingy, affectionate, innocent and loyal, often with a vulnerable aesthetic (Shasha 2018). These fantasies reflect collective and media discourses on contemporary Chinese femininity, including the rise of strong female leads in dramas (Ying 2020), and the popularity of “little fresh meat” in East Asian media (Yu et al. 2025). They allow women to reframe masculinity in ways that challenge hegemonic ideals of virility and national strength widely celebrated in Chinese mainstream media (Oban International 2022; Song 2022).

Yet, the conflation of soft masculinity with delicacy and fragility positions women as careful, nurturing protectors, exposing a central tension in postfeminism: female empowerment is often marketed through emotional control and affective labor rather than structural resistance (de Laat and Baumann 2016; Yan 2009). In this framing, women’s agency risks being reduced to the work of care (e.g., managing men’s vulnerabilities) rather than dismantling the patriarchal order that produces them.

Moreover, what might appear as empowerment through a ‘maternal’ protective stance (e.g., *“if he were my own child...feeling...a strong desire to protect him from harm”*) can be more critically read as infantilization. Just as a woman’s physique has historically been shaped by the infantilization of femininity, rendering her harmless, naïve, or in need of protection to please the male gaze (Sidani 2023, p. 194), men here are cast as ‘big kids’ who can be controlled, indulged, or guided. This reversal embodies an ambivalent politics. On the one hand, the dissolution of male dominance empowers women to position themselves as guardians or decision-makers, rebalancing intimate power relations. On the other hand, valorizing the infantilization of men as an ideal gender dynamic risks reproducing the very sexist logics feminists have long critiqued (Wolf 1991), where dominance is justified not by equality but by asymmetry, with one party framed as vulnerable and the other as a natural

caregiver. What may feel like empowerment can therefore slide into a re-inscription of essentialist gender binaries, rather than their transformation.

In sum, women's decoding of soft, non-threatening men does not dissolve rigid gender boundaries but reconfigures them into a new hierarchy: men are only desirable when infantilized and stripped of aggression. Femininity, in turn, gains the upper hand not through equality but through dominance justified by nurturance and protection, an ambivalent empowerment that both challenges and reproduces asymmetrical power relations.

Ambivalent Empowerment through Romanticized Submission

In contrast to the earlier theme where women decode the ads through the lens of infantilization, their interpretations of male celebrities, such as Jackson Wang⁴ and Wang Yibo⁵ in fragrance and lipstick ads respectively, exhibit an active female gaze that renders the male body as an erotic, sexual spectacle. As shown in Mian Mian's and Yang Yang's readings below, the consumption of sexualized men appears to make them feel empowered by offering them scopophilic indulgence and fantasy escape into relationships with rich, powerful and culturally refined men.

Mian Mian: *[When I wear the bright red lipstick he holds and smells in the ad] It feels like I'm going on a date with Wang Yibo. He's so handsome and I'm so happy. The aura of abstinence he exudes is like that of someone who enjoys BDSM. Not just any woman can*

⁴ Jackson Wang – Armani: Jackson Wang is known for his bold, confident, and sensual appeal. Popular media frames him as physically charismatic and deeply expressive, which aligns with Armani's fragrance visuals, capturing close-ups of sweat, breath, and immersive scent experiences that evoke intimacy and natural allure.

⁵ Wang Yibo – Shu Uemura: Wang Yibo is celebrated for his edgy yet approachable style, balancing intensity with charm. Media coverage emphasizes his youthful energy and fashion-forward looks, resonating with Shu Uemura's visually dynamic campaign, featuring vibrant orange eyeshadow and red ribbons wrapped around his hand and eyes, intertwining product imagery with dramatic yet soft gestures.

be with him; he likes mature, sexy, and charming women. And he has quite strong sexual abilities. ...Before going to bed with him, he would take you to enjoy Western food, drink red wine and listen to piano music. Wang Yibo has the same CEO aura as Christian Grey in Fifty Shades of Grey. Anyway, he's quite wealthy. (Aged 28, university administrator)

Yang Yang: The image of Jackson Wang has showcased the high-end nature of Armani...It also makes me feel the fragrant will make you feel languorous after satisfying all your desires. The fragrance obtains that upper-class feel to it, makes you feel part of the noble. He sprays it on his ear, then sprays it back and forth [between his wrist and neckline]. Because the ears are very sensual, it's sort of sexy. I found the subtle sexiness, and a sense of restrain [represented by Jackson Wang's demeanor in the ad] very attractive. (Aged 25, cosmetic product developer)

Yet, this empowerment is highly ambivalent. Upon critical inspection, the reversal of the male gaze is limited and superficial. While both Ting Ting and Yang Yang, among others, articulate sexual desire and reinterpret hegemonic masculinity in ways that serve their own affective, sexual, and even social desires, these interpretive acts appear culturally mediated, not free-floating. Osburg (2013) illuminates how, in post-socialist China, relationships, whether romantic, sexual, or professional, are often underpinned by an exchange logic but it is concealed by the language of love, care, or commitment, particularly for women whose financial and cultural capitals are limited. Under this neoliberal/post-socialist moral system, being with a wealthy, powerful man can be experienced as a form of empowerment, providing economic insurance, symbolic recognition and upward social mobility. For example, Yang Yang's association of feeling "part of the noble" with elite masculinity and fascination with "restrained sensuality" and "aristocratic detachment" reflect a cultural

internalization of male supremacy within patriarchal and classed contexts, beyond raw sexual aggression.

Notably, in many decoding efforts (e.g., Xiao Ke likens the image of Jackson Wang to “Ba Dao Zong Cai”, i.e., “an overbearing CEO”; Wang Yan admires Wang Yibo’s “mogul” vibe), our women readers appear to define their self-value through their imagined compatibility with elite men. Instead of viewing themselves as submissive or a prey, they pride on this compatibility. Mian Mian’s elaborate BDSM-inspired fantasy, for instance, is framed almost completely around being Wang Yibo’s chosen one, which hinges on her being “mature” and “sexy” with a certain charm, underscoring a highly internalized male gaze and evaluation system in which men possess refined tastes and women are valued only through their gaze. This echoes Bourdieu’s (1984) thesis that aesthetic distinction is a class symbol, which in these fantasies becomes gendered and reinforces not only class-based masculinities but interpersonal power dynamics (also see Pyke 1996). In the end, the “female gaze” becomes ‘a mirrored gaze’, reflecting masculine norms of aesthetic control, emotional distance and sexual prowess. Therefore, rather than challenging the patriarchy, postfeminist sexual freedom here is not about mutual pleasure, it is conditional and mediated by patriarchal codes circulated in media imagery and cultural scripts.

For instance, the references to imageries of male celebrities as the “Ba Dao Zong Cai” (“an overbearing CEO”) or “Christian Grey” of *Fifty Shades of Grey* suggest how our readers actively interpret and give meaning to the ads by using popular narrative plots dispersed through romantic TV dramas and fictions in China’s post-socialist modernity. The stories generally adhere to a clichéd storyline, depicting the upward social mobility journey a girl of humble background experiences after attracting a wealthy and domineering young man’s romantic attention (Song 2023). These storylines endorse a romanticization of hegemonic (and, at times, toxic) elite masculinity, where male dominance (including sexual coercion on

occasions) is glorified and justified in romantic settings and women are positioned as aspirational partners, and not as autonomous agents. In summary, the romantic fantasies evoked by depictions of Wang Yibo and Jackson Wang in the beauty ads are pleasurable, but not transformative, often reflecting an uncritical adaption of patriarchal ideals under the illusion of empowerment, re-inscribing gender inequality.

Ambivalent Empowerment through Gender Boundary Policing

Postfeminism often celebrates personal freedom, tolerance and choice, particularly the entitlement to consume (Lazar 2009; McRobbie 2008). At first glance, it seems that many of our Chinese female readers embrace these values by extending their support to androgynous portrayals of male celebrities, and to inclusive masculinity in advertising (also see Louie 2024). Nevertheless, on closer examination, this support is largely conditional and carefully circumscribed, as illustrated by Liu Meng and Jie Jie's responses below.

Liu Meng: I support men wearing makeup because everyone has the right to express themselves... It can help those men who enjoy makeup and have feminine traits to be understood and accepted. But it shouldn't be too extreme (just basic foundation if you're an ordinary man). There're still many men who are inherently masculine, and they might be affected... Gay men can wear more pronounced feminine makeup because I feel it doesn't have much to do with me. (Aged 23, student)

Jie Jie: Ads can portray masculinity in more diverse ways. Corporations should exercise their social responsibility to promote greater tolerance...Zhou Shen himself has innate feminine traits, and I think the portrayal of him in the Florasis's ad is still within the range of what society can accept. However...in the Shu Uemura lipstick ad, Wang Yibo's

red lips and noticeable eye makeup make him look quite 'niang' ('sissy') to me. (Aged 28, real estate agent)

At face value, Liu Meng and Jie Jie's readings, articulated through the vocabulary of liberal inclusion, such as "everyone has the right to express themselves", "ads can portray masculinity in more diverse ways", and "corporations should promote greater tolerance", appear to endorse inclusive advertising (Viglia et al. 2023; Zayer et al. 2023). Supporting men's diverse expressions of masculinity is framed not only as men's freedom of self-expression but also as tied to women's struggle for gender equality. As Lin Xi argues: "Why do traditionally masculine terms come with more positive connotations, like 'manly' or 'tomboy,' while phrases like 'you're so girly' or 'you're so motherly' sound derogatory?" (28, civil servant). Her reflection underscores Connell's relational view that masculinity and femininity gain meaning only in relation to one another (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Wedgwood 2009). Through these readings, support for men's diverse expressions of masculinity is framed not only as men's freedom of self-expression but also as linked to women's pursuit of gender equality.

That said, this empowerment is ambivalent, compromised by boundary policing that reconstructs, rather than deconstructs, rigid gender norms. Their advocacy of tolerance is entangled with evaluative judgments, assertions of authenticity, and strategies of symbolic distancing. Liu Meng, for example, restricts "ordinary men" to "light" makeup, while relegating more visible feminization to gay men. Similarly, Jie Jie legitimizes Zhou Shen's androgynous representation as 'authentic' to his "innate feminine traits", while dismissing Wang Yibo's red lips and eye makeup as 'inauthentic' and "sissy". Unlike Mian Mian, whose reading embraces a romanticized submission to Wang Yibo's elite masculinity in the prior theme, Jie Jie's reading foregrounds what she perceives as an overly feminized appearance that disrupts normative masculine aesthetics, thereby withdrawing the symbolic capital of

desirability from him. Such judgments reveal how women themselves can participate in regulating acceptable masculinities, excluding what they regard as inauthentic expressions of gender from heteronormative relational and sexual domains.

Audience positionality further shapes these judgments. Androgynous portrayals are tolerated if coded as innate or queer but policed as dangerous when embodied by “ordinary men”. Liu Meng’s concern that “inherently masculine men might be affected” signals a social anxiety that echoes China’s state discourse on the “Prevention of the Feminization of Male Teenagers” (Yu and Sui 2023). Here, femininity is framed as contaminating when embodied by heterosexual men, threatening cultural dominance and romantic desirability. This reading resonates with Butler’s (2007) notion of the normative violence of heterosexuality, which demands alignments between sex, gender, identity, and desire, hence stifling alternative expressions (p. 36). In this way, the women’s selective tolerance ultimately reinscribes hegemonic heteronormativity.

This boundary-setting also has broader consequences for women. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note, women are central to the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. Ting Ting, reflecting on the importance of supporting diverse gender expressions, explained: “When men adhere to the belief that ‘men should work outside while women should stay at home’, they are restricting women’s opportunities to be independent.” (23, freelancer). Her critique highlights how policing masculine expressions not only confines men to gender normative behavior but also sustains restrictive gender relations that disadvantage women.

In sum, while female readers may feel empowered by advocating gender diversity in advertising, this empowerment remains ambivalent when it reinforces normative boundaries. Their heterosexual imagination (Ingraham 1994) sanctions only limited, binary-compatible subversions of masculinity, producing an empowerment that affirms women’s agency, yet simultaneously reproduces hegemonic masculinity.

DISCUSSION

Combining Reader Response Theory (Belk 2017; Scott 1994), Audience Reception Theory (Schröder, 2000; Ross, 2011), and feminist literary criticism (Stern 1993), this study offers a culturally nuanced account of how Chinese women interpret and affectively engage with male celebrities featured in beauty advertising targeting female consumers. This interdisciplinary lens reveals that interpretations are not only ideological, but also affective, narrative, and autobiographical. Our female readers engaged in a delicate dance between *text-acceptance* (e.g., embracing portrayals of “soft” or “elite” masculinity as aspirational, romantic, or empowering within familiar heteronormative scripts) and *text-oppositional* (e.g., critiquing exaggerated femininity as “sissy”, thereby reasserting conventional gender boundaries) (Ross 2011). They decoded and comprehended the ads in relation to their own positionality/subjective perspective within Chinese cultural scripts and gendered hierarchies (Scott 1994), often involving an immersive or critical stance towards the text (Schröder 2000), and through the lens of relational empathy (Stern 1993). The resulting readings of “Nan Se” consumption reflect Chinese female empowerment as a subjective, ambivalent experience that is tension-laden. It focuses on emotional fulfillment, romantic fantasy, and relational legitimacy, rather than on collective resistance or structural transformation in contemporary China.

Indeed, as our participants decoded the portrayals of male celebrities, they simultaneously encoded their own (embodied) desires, power imageries, and identity aspirations into the storylines they constructed. These storylines, we found, while advocating plural ways of being a man, concurrently affirmed traditional gender ideologies, especially in intimate, private spheres. For example, Ting Ting and Bei Bei’s affection for the soft masculinity embodied by Xiao Zhan or Zhou Shen appears to dissolve male dominance through

infantilization, yet such readings ultimately reinstate asymmetrical power relations without challenging the underlying structures of gender inequality. Likewise, Mian Mian and Yang Yang's erotic fantasies of elite, overbearing masculinity (e.g., the Christian Grey archetype) satisfy sexual and material desires but reinscribe romantic submission and classed dependence, reflecting the internalization of a neoliberal logic in which self-worth is only validated through aesthetic cultivation and alignment with elite male power (Osburg 2013).

Perhaps the most telling ambivalence arises in women's selective readings of androgynous male celebrities through what we term *gender boundary policing*. For participants like Liu Meng and Jie Jie, androgyny is tolerated only when symbolically distanced from romance or everyday masculinity. This interpretative stance exemplifies a paradoxical form of empowerment: through their readings, women exercise agency by policing gender boundaries, yet this very act reproduces hegemonic masculinity and reasserts the narrow definitions of femininity that Ting Ting aspired to widen. This dynamic echoes Zayer, McGrath, and Castro-González's (2020) study on gender ideals in advertising, in which a Chinese male informant similarly delegitimated androgynous male portrayals to reaffirm established ideals of "Chinese" masculinity: "The image is changing. You can see this from ads, and men are getting more familiar with cosmetics than women. I don't like this, for I don't think this is what a man should be like. I think the real man should be like Roger Federer, who has won about 16 championships" (p. 250).

These interpretative logics resonate with Coleman, Zayer, and Karaca (2020), who note that inclusivity in advertising is culturally situated and mediated by conflicting institutional logics (also see Zayer and Coleman 2015). Inclusive portrayals of gender representation, they note, are negotiated within overlapping market, state, and sociocultural structures that subtly regulate what can be deemed as legitimate or culturally intelligible as a form of "hidden censorship". In our study, androgenous portrayals of male celebrity signal progressiveness

yet remain domesticated within heteronormative and nationalistic frameworks (Song 2022; Yu and Sui 2023). Chinese femvertising balances commercially appealing images of male beauty and the gender norms reinforced by state cultural governance, producing an inclusivity that is carefully managed, appearing transformative while sustaining existing hierarchies.

From a reader-response/audience reception perspective, our participants' interpretations reveal how such hidden censorship is internalized at the level of meaning-making, exposing the gap between advertising that speaks to empowerment and advertising that enacts it. The male-led gynocentric beauty ads examined here symbolically address women's aspirations for recognition, success, sexual fulfilment, dominance or 'equality', yet they stop short of challenging the structural conditions that sustain gendered inequality. They offer tokenistic empowerment, that is, momentary affective gratifications that allow women to feel empowered through consumption while reinforcing patriarchal logics of gender hierarchy. In this sense, "Nan Se" consumption provides Chinese women with symbolic concessions that align with the state's broader project of maintaining social harmony and patriarchal stability, rather than creating space for critical reflection or resistance (cf., McRobbie 2008; Windels et al. 2020).

Toward a Culturally Nuanced Theory of Inclusive and Transformative Advertising

Transformative and inclusive advertising has become a powerful tool for commercial promotion and social advocacy, amplifying marginalized voices through campaigns such as #MeToo, #LikeAGirl and #HeForShe (Adalı et al. 2025; Gurrieri et al. 2022; Viglia et al. 2023; Zayer et al. 2023). Evidently, femvertising sells (Iqbal 2015)! Yet, as Coleman, Zayer, and Karaca (2020) observe, "macro forces influence various institutional logics that inform

individuals' perceptions of both their own agency within institutional structures and with regard to gender. While actors may be capable and reflexive, even in times of transition or institutional disruption, individual agency varies among actors and types of social structures" (p. 522). The effectiveness of such advertising thus depends not merely on creative subversion, but on a keen understanding of the social, cultural and political settings in which they operate (cf., Stevens and Ostberg 2020).

Our findings extend this conversation by showing that femvertising in China diverges from Western practices in their moral, emotional, and political orientation. Whereas Western femvertising often foregrounds bold political brand/cultural activism or social messaging (Varghese and Kumar 2022), Chinese campaigns tend to embed empowerment within relational and moral narratives emphasizing self-love, inner virtues, and relational empathy (Qiao and Wang 2022). These narratives are in line with Confucian ideals of familial harmony and self-cultivation (Rainey 2010), rather than with feminist critique. Within this context, beauty brands' deployment of male celebrities reveals how "Nan Se" consumption markets empowerment through intimate affect rather than structural critique, echoing the broader commercial logic of China's "She Economy" (Li 2020) and the state-regulated consumer culture shaping aspirational subjectivities (Yan 2010).

Our participants' readings reveal that empowerment is experienced in relational and affective terms, through the desire to nurture/infantilize, to be desired, or to regulate acceptable masculinity. These narratives enact a postfeminist logic (Genz and Brabon 2017) in which emotional satisfaction and consumption compensate for structural inequalities (Lazar 2009; McRobbie 2008). Yet, as Ge (2025) argues, post-(socialist-)feminist sensibilities in China denote women's recognition of, and negotiation with, the gendered cultural regulations of heteropatriarchy shaped by both post-socialist governance and transnational postfeminism. Against this backdrop, Ge frames young Chinese women as

“ambivalent desiring subjects”. Ambivalence here captures the coexistence of progressive and regressive impulses, whereby women’s aspirations for self-realization remain entangled with inherited norms of relational duty, moral virtue, and heteronormative respectability.

Our findings similarly show that the sense of empowerment our participants derived from their readings of “Nan Se” consumption is shaped by what Ge (2025) calls “the grammar of ambivalences”; a disposition that values the simultaneity of “and... and...”, rather than “a binary thinking of dominance versus resistance” (p. 15). Empowerment is legitimized precisely through engagements that reaffirm moral hierarchies and relational gender norms. For example, the desire to nurture and the impulse to infantilize seemingly vulnerable or care-dependent male figures coexist as intertwined expressions of care and hierarchy, producing a form of ‘maternalized’ control that enables women to experience intimacy and authority simultaneously, even as it reasserts asymmetrical gender order. In a sociocultural landscape where feminist identity is often denounced as “unfeminine” (He 2023), female empowerment is not illusory but ambivalently lived. It is structured by inequality yet emotionally real, mediated through desires and fantasies cultivated within China’s contemporary moral economy (Osburg 2013).

Taken together, these findings call for a culturally nuanced theory of inclusive and transformative advertising. Inclusivity cannot be assumed as a universal ideal (Viglia et al. 2023; Wilkie et al. 2023) but must be examined as a culturally mediated practice shaped by state regulation, market logics, and moral discourses that delineate which forms of gender expression and empowerment are publicly intelligible (cf., Coleman et al. 2020). We therefore advance the concept of ambivalent empowerment as a bridge for theorizing inclusivity in advertising. It illuminates how emancipation and inequality, care and control, and resistance and conformity coexist within the same affective and interpretative space. Through this lens, inclusivity appears not as a stable or universally progressive goal, but as a

dynamic cultural negotiation; one that may feel transformative while concurrently reproducing inherited hierarchies. Yet, as Ge (2025) reminds us, it is precisely the sensible and critical recognition of such contradictions—the awareness of the tension between pleasure-oriented fantasies of freedom and the backward pull of socio-cultural constraints—that grants these women the transformative momentum toward imagining more liveable futures.

Managerial Implications

The study findings also offer important managerial implications for advertising practitioners working at the intersection of gender, media, and consumer engagement in contemporary China. In crafting culturally resonant narratives of femvertising, brands must consider women's desires, ambivalences, and interpretive agency within the sociocultural and political conditions of their lives (Coleman et al. 2020; Ge 2025). Building on Zayer, McGrath, and Castro-González (2020), who highlight the cultural-cognitive forces shaping men's interpretations of legitimate masculinity, our study shows how Chinese women's readings of alternative masculinities both challenge and reproduce gender hierarchies. The interplay of empathy, desire, and moral evaluation embedded in these readings underscores that gender representation in advertising operates as a moral field where relational wellbeing and cultural intelligibility, rather than individual identity alone, are continually negotiated.

Although empowerment was not universally embraced, participants' readings revealed ambivalent forms of agency that privileged relational satisfaction and mutual care over individual autonomy. For instance, when fantasizing about a “puppy-like” boyfriend, Bei Bei envisioned a gentle, emotionally attuned partner who “doesn't try to read you”, thus legitimating her protective and affectionate stance. Even within narratives of romantic

submission, empowerment emerged through reciprocal exchange in which social, material, and erotic forms of care circulated between partners. Similarly, women's boundary policing of inclusivity articulated their preferred relational dynamics (e.g., liberal versus private imageries) without fully rejecting traditional scripts of intimacy.

For practitioners, these insights suggest that meaningful femvertising in China requires reframing empowerment away from individualist tropes of resistance toward more relational and interdependent models of wellbeing. Brands can achieve this by broadening representations of reciprocity and shared responsibility across social, familial and professional domains. This may involve portraying both men and women as active contributors to one another's growth in their roles as parents, partners, and colleagues. Rather than focusing solely on dismantling hierarchies, campaigns can depict complementary and evolving forms of masculinity and femininity that make space for gentle, vulnerable, and nurturing men alongside self-defining and aspirational women, while framing gender inequality as a structural barrier to collective wellbeing.

In sum, as Fei (1992) observes, under the ruling of China's party-state, individuals are discouraged from openly challenging traditional structures but may reinterpret and adapt them while "paying lip service" to the convention (also see Liu and Kozinets 2022). Western-style feminist messages emphasizing rebellion, political activism, sexual emancipation, or radical individualism may clash with Chinese traditional values of harmony, familial obligation, and relational identity rooted in Confucian ethics (Rainey 2010; Yan 2017). In this context, empowerment should not be conceived as a zero-sum game in which women's advancement necessitates men's decline, but as a process of mutual growth, relational self-cultivation, and shared wellbeing. These are values resonate with government-sanctioned discourses of societal harmony and collective advancement (Nachtigal 2024). In this way, brands can act as cultural intermediaries (Stevens and Ostberg 2020) that not only reflect but

help reshape public understandings of gender equality and wellbeing as shared, co-constitutive, and culturally resonant ideals in modern China.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite of the nuanced insights derived from how young Chinese women interpret the inclusion of gynocentric beauty advertising, the study has a number of limitations that open avenues for future research.

First, our participants were women aged 23 to 29, a group that tends to actively negotiate gender norms, and relational desires (Song and Lai 2022). Their accounts often framed male celebrities as idealized romantic partners, which may not reflect the experiences of older women, adolescents, or those at different life stages. As life transitions such as entering university, full-time work, marriage or motherhood often reshape gender ideologies and relational expectations (Qiu 2020), ideals of masculinity, and by extension female empowerment, are also likely to shift. Future research should adopt a life-course perspective to explore how meanings of gender empowerment and relational wellbeing evolve across key developmental and relational milestones.

Second, the study analyzed four video advertisements featuring male celebrities promoting women's cosmetics. This focused selection ensured representational diversity and cultural salience such as portrayals of the "little fresh meat" and the "overbearing CEO" but may have led to more romantic or heteronormative readings. Future research could examine male celebrity portrayals across broader product categories, such as education, finance, and family services, to examine whether interpretations of the "ideal man" change when relational scripts extend beyond beauty and seduction.

Third, the interpretive depth achieved through our analytical framework limited the generalizability of the findings. The study's young, media-literate participants represent a

highly engaged segment of China's beauty market whose interpretations are shaped by both advertising narratives and parasocial familiarity with celebrities. Future work could explore less culturally visible or regionally specific advertising campaigns to identify alternative ways in which gendered messages are received and negotiated.

Finally, as women increasingly shape consumption fields across traditionally male-dominated categories (Liffreing 2024), future studies should investigate how women interpret male-targeted advertising in areas such as fashion, grooming, technology, and automobiles. Such research could reveal how women's readings blur gendered market boundaries and reconfigure ideals of care, competence, and empowerment.

In sum, future research should examine how empowerment and intimacy evolve across life stages, markets, and cultural contexts to clarify how advertising reflects or reshapes gender, desire, and wellbeing in contemporary China, offering a springboard from which to foster more equitable and transformative representations of gender relations.

CONCLUSION

Gender representation in ads must reflect cultural intelligence, emotional sensitivity and political awareness, especially in (semi-)authoritarian states where patriarchal structures remain prominent. This entails understanding how empowerment is not as a one-size-fits-all concept (e.g., Western-centric feminism), but a localized discourse where its lived experience is culturally contingent and influenced by history, gender norms, state ideology, and evolving consumer desires and subjectivities.

Hence, theorizing inclusive and transformative advertising as a negotiated cultural practice enables advertisers to engage in a more relational and reflexive model, where brands not only consider who is being represented, but how, why, and for whom, and with what affective (e.g., ambivalent empowerment) and ideological (e.g., reaffirmation of the patriarchy, gender

boundary policing etc.) consequences—all while negotiating or circumnavigating the constraints of tradition, authority, and individual/collective affective habitus (e.g., creatively re-interpreting traditional values in ways that align with key political and feminist agendas).

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