

# *Gendered Portrayal in Contemporary Chinese Beauty Video Advertisements*

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**Abstract:** Advertising images play a significant role in gender studies because they reflect and model the public's opinions about gender. In this study, we will narrow our focus down to gender role portrayals in contemporary Chinese beauty product video advertising to examine whether they show some particularities. At the same time, we will analyze the representation of both male and female roles and distinguish concept and product advertisements, expecting further discoveries that could be informative and valuable for future studies. First, we intend to unveil the implying messages about gender through the content analysis of a sample of 60 advertisements collected on the website Meihua.info, using different parameters including genders, appearances, family and social identities, and personalities. Then, we attempt to provide possible explanations for these research results, connecting them to specific social backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Gender images, gendered aesthetics, advertising

## 1. Introduction

Images in advertising play a significant role in gender study because it conveys information about how people perceive gender and strongly affect public ideas about gender. Many researchers have studied images of gender roles in advertising, though most of them only focus on one gender role (that of male or female) in print and TV advertisements, which are not so prevalent nowadays with the pervasiveness of online advertising. In addition, there are just a few studies concentrating on advertising of a particular industry like beauty products, which is crucial to gender study because it mainly targets women's audience and thus pays great attention to women's psychology. Relevant studies concentrating on contemporary context are also insufficient since most of them were conducted and published between 2000 and 2010, along with the quickly increasing proliferation of the Internet as a new medium. Considering the transformation of social context in recent years, it's necessary and valuable to study the topic from a more up-to-date perspective.

Consequently, we decided to narrow our study to contemporary Chinese online advertising for beauty products. According to [www.definitions.net](http://www.definitions.net) [1], beauty products used in this article refer to cosmetics, materials, and devices made and sold to enhance the physical attractiveness of users.

In current studies which we find concentrating on the female role in advertising, there are mainly two different conclusions, one suggesting that female role images in advertising only portray women within the traditional gender frame and therefore further reinforce it, and the other conversely

supposes that women representation in advertising is becoming increasingly diverse and confident, thus promoting gender equality. Accordingly, we desire to explore which one is more congruent with the fact, or both are lopsided.

Moreover, according to our observation, there are apparent disparities between the diversity of gender images in product and conceptual advertisements. While product advertisements aim to sell products, conceptual advertisements focus more on promoting brand values.

Therefore, this essay has three objectives within the terrain of contemporary Chinese online advertising in the beauty products industry: 1) To provide a synthesis of male and female images and to explore differences in gender images. 2) To investigate whether female images presented in advertisements challenge, maintain, or reinforce gender conventions. 3) To distinguish between product and concept advertising and analyze whether there are differences between gender representations in concept advertisements relative to product advertisements.

## 2. Literature Review

Advertising played a pivotal role in social and cultural studies, magnifying and reflecting dominant societal values [2]. In other researchers' views, it not only "mirrors" but also "models" people's behavior and social relationships through the identity recognition accomplished in consumption [3]. Especially in the current advertising marketplace, when "visual signs" play a more pervasive and crucial role than "verbal signs", advertisements succeed in capturing public attention as well as attaining its affection more effectively and subtly [4].

Among existing studies that study gender role images in advertising, some suggest that advertising images of both genders are becoming increasingly diverse and thus challenge the traditional gender frame. According to Kaifang Wang, male images in TV advertisements are portrayed with more traditionally feminine attributes like tenderness and consideration, whereas females with more masculine traits like assertiveness and determination [5]. At the same time, the relationship between the two sexes is moving from hostility to harmony and collaboration. In addition, Mengyuan Yang's research notes advertisements increasingly portray working women and women with a diverse range of ages and appearances, which is unconventional [6]. Concerning studies concentrating on male images, Yan Yang emphasizes the transformation from "successful men" to "ordinary men", from "head of household" to "househusband", from "masculinity and toughness" to "tenderness and emotion"[7]. Ting Yu also focuses on the non-traditional male images in contemporary advertising, classifying them into four categories—men with attractive appearances, men with successful careers, men with muscular figures, and men with tender personalities [8].

Other researchers, however, note that gender images in advertisements still cater to conventional gender stereotypes. Ferguson et al. report that advertising in female-audience magazines reinforces sexism by depicting women pursuing beauty and being unable to deal with complicated professional tasks. Similarly [9], Franzoi posits that sexism is associated with female-audience magazines, in which females are frequently represented in decorative roles with increasing use of cosmetics and great concern for their appearance [10].

Within the terrain of the beauty products industry, there are mainly two different kinds of voices about female images in advertising. According to Xiaowei Zhu et al., women's representation in advertising conveys homogeneous and misleading information about beauty, linking confident and successful life with extraordinary physical attractiveness, which is almost unattainable for most women [11]. Lingli Chen holds a similar opinion, indicating that the two kinds of female images frequently portrayed in advertising are divorced from reality. The first refers to women with striking beauty, and the second manifests in women with originally ordinary but then fascinating appearances because of the use of certain products [12]. Nonetheless, Yuan Li assumes that women in advertising

are depicted as more physically healthy and diverse, adhering to the women-empowering values, such as inner confidence and bravery in pursuit of one's dream [13].

Concerning research focusing on male images in the beauty products industry, Ying Ye posits that, although there is an obvious diversity trend in male images, men with prominent masculinity still occupy the mainstream status [14]. Liqi Duan subdivides the advertising into male-audience and female-audience, suggesting that men are more likely to be portrayed as masculine in the former and feminine in the latter [15].

Finally, since our research will be conducted in contemporary China, it is necessary to briefly review the progress of women's empowerment in recent years. According to the Outline of Chinese Women's Development issued by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2020 [16], it has witnessed apparent and inspiring progress in women's development in comparison with ten years ago, reflected in the improvement of women's situation in employment, political participation, education, and social security.

### 3. Methodology

To ensure the scope and availability of video advertising data, we collected samples from the ad archive Merhua.info. Since we want to analyze gender images in beauty advertisements, our samples were collected from the cosmetics and personal care video advertisement section on Meihua.info, which included 400 video advertisements. The samples were collected from June 27 to Jun 29, 2022. We numbered the 400 advertisements from 0 to 399 and used a computer program to randomly generate 60 numbers from 0 to 399, and their corresponding advertisements formed our sample. Randomized sampling is appropriate for this study since this method is economical and timesaving. Due to the small sample size, no significant amount of equipment is needed since the program can quickly generate 60 numbers.

The selected samples are divided into two categories: product advertisements and conceptual advertisements. Product advertisements mention and/or feature particular products, while conceptual advertisements do not feature any products and only promote ideas such as brand values. Under each category, we would analyze the theme and characters of sampled advertisements. In character analysis, we would identify and categorize characters by their genders, appearances, occupations or family roles, and personalities.

### 4. Results

The theme of the advertisement is the central message it is trying to convey, which may be noted in the ad's title and generalized from its voiceover. Advertisements without a identifiable theme would be classified as discernible. Due to the diversity of advertisement themes, we would group advertisements with themes that occurred sporadically under one section called "Other" (see appendix H).

Regarding character traits, we identified and categorized characters by their genders, appearances, occupations or family roles, and personalities. To begin with, when we analyze the physical appearance of ad characters, we mainly examine their age, skin tone, and body size. First, we categorize ad characters by four age groups: children and adolescents ( $\leq 18$ ), young adults (19~30), middle-aged adults (30~50), and seniors (50+) (see appendixes B and C). In addition, we examine whether male and female characters cater to or defy contemporary beauty standards in China. For females, such standards include being slim, pale-skinned, and youthful. These standards are relatively new since traditionally, women with mild plumpness were seen as beautiful and healthy in China [17]. But in a project for promoting the development of global physical health standards, the World Health Organization (WHO) found that for Asians, the ideal body type for a woman is slim with slender legs,

waist, and a flat abdomen [18]. Meanwhile, contemporary beauty standards for males include appearing muscular and tanned. We also note that, however, advertisements also feature characters with average body sizes and yellow skin tones who do not satisfy nor defy these beauty standards, so we classify those with average appearances as common folks.

Secondly, we identify a character's role (or identity) by their occupation or predominant family role displayed in the advertisement. Such family roles include mothers/fathers and girlfriends/boyfriends. We also classify celebrityhood as an occupation. Well-known personalities in China or non-Chinese actors/actresses who endorsed the advertisements are counted as celebrities. Due to the variety of character roles, researchers will only single out roles that have appeared at least five times.

Thirdly, we determine characters' personalities by examining their body language, their monologues or dialogues, as well as their facial expressions. Each character would be only cataloged under one personality, and such personalities include "bold and ambitious" and "tender and delicate" (see appendix G).

## 5. Discussions and Analysis

### 5.1. Female Bloggers and Women's Empowerment

A noticeable trend in our samples is the presence of bloggers in female roles. There were 17 bloggers, accounting for 12.2%, ranking third after celebrities who accounted for 20.1% of all 139 female roles (see appendix A).

The nature of blogging may explain why bloggers are frequently featured. Bloggers are freelance content creators that post articles, photos, or videos on the internet. They have a high degree of autonomy when it comes to choosing the subject and format of their creations, enabling them to create highly individualistic and personal content. Meanwhile, the nature of an office worker's job is not at her discretion but at that of her employer. Office workers cannot reject assigned work that they are not interested in or risk being fired. But since bloggers do not have superiors, they have more freedom in pursuing their interests in their works. Unlike office workers, bloggers also do not work by the clock and can choose their working schedules.

Sample advertisements often portray female bloggers since they embody the theme of pursuing freedom outside the domestic sphere. For instance, a product advertisement released by lipstick brand Perfect Diary was endorsed by a travel blogger and a fashion blogger, both women. The ad's theme is to encourage customers to follow in their footsteps and pursue beauty, which aligns with the nature of blogging. The ad portrays the travel blogger savoring life slowly as she wished, saying that "[I] take my time, the world is my home". Meanwhile, the fashion blogger enjoys life quicker, saying she wants to "try many possibilities starting from scratch" and that "there's nothing to be afraid of". Not only are these women stepping out of the domestic sphere, but the confines of the office also unshackle them. Their freedom of choice and courage in pursuing their hearts' desire is congruent with the Zeitgeist of women's empowerment, a process in which women come to believe that they are capable "to construct, and take responsibility for, [their] gendered identity, [their] politics, and [their] choices" [19].

However, product advertisements centered on empowerment invariably juxtapose women's empowerment with purchasing a beauty product. This juxtaposition insinuates that women consumers should gain self-esteem and confidence through " 'female empowerment in advertising and purchasing, instead of solving problems through technical, intellectual or business skills like men do" [20]. Though women in product advertisements appear to pursue autonomy and individuality, they are nonetheless constrained by the gendered convention that women should enhance their appearances.

## **5.2. The Monotonous Portrayal of Men — Attractive Celebrities with Less Muscular Appearances**

Compared to the relative diversity of female images, male images in beauty product advertising are highly homogeneous. A possible explanation may be that in an industry where potential consumers mainly consist of women, the producers of the advertisements would utilize the diversity of female images to show their support for women's empowerment, with the final purpose of attaining the affection and loyalty of women consumers. Male images, however, are only employed to attract female consumers and persuade them into buying products, thus it will be most efficient to only portray men with highly attractive attributes.

Concerning concrete traits, most male spokesmen in the samples possess a good and less muscular appearance and a great amount of following. This phenomenon could be explained on the economic and psychological levels, respectively. In the aspect of the economy, China has witnessed conspicuous economic prosperity since the reform and opening-up in 1978. According to research by the University of Aberdeen, women in more affluent societies prefer men with more femininity [21]. In addition, many pieces of research have evidenced that the fan economy plays an increasingly important role in the current economy [22], especially among women consumers [23]. Unlike ordinary consumers who make buying decisions for practical purposes and easily recoil at a high price, fans are more inclined to spend a large amount of money to purchase products endorsed by their idols to show their affection and loyalty [24]. Consequently, producers of advertisements are more likely to use male spokespersons with a great amount of firm following than ordinary males. In psychology, women prefer male images with less muscularity, possibly because of its implied message of less aggressiveness. Adding to the fact that a highly attractive appearance usually shows a positive relation to the great amount of following, it can be explained why male spokesmen with attractive appearances, non-traditional less muscular figures, and massive fanbases are preferred by advertising agencies.

## **6. Female Character Diversity (in Terms of Appearance) in Concept Advertisements Relative to Product Advertisements**

We found that female characters in conceptual advertisements have more diverse physical appearances, such as skin tone, body size, and age than in product advertisements. While 56 (70.9%) female characters are slim and pale-skinned in product advertisements, 25 (41.7%) female characters conform to this aesthetic in concept advertisements (see appendix D). In addition, 26 (43.3%) female characters in concept advertisements defy these standards, exhibiting physical traits such as tanned skin and muscles. In product advertisements, however, only 6 (7.6%) female characters defy contemporary beauty standards in China (see appendix D).

This disparity may be explained by the different aims of product and concept advertisements. While product advertisements advertise a product, concept advertisements promote ideologies that adhere to the firm's brand value. Since product advertisements are directly linked to the promotion of products, it is easier for consumers to discern and resist the capitalist incentive behind deploying themes of empowerment in advertisements. But since concept advertising is detached from a particular product, its theme is no longer affiliated with marketing goods. Product advertisements often feature gendered beauty standards that the audience internalized, such as the mainstream "pale and slim" aesthetics for East Asia women, which compel the audience to consume in order to attain desired body images displayed in advertisements. Meanwhile, conceptual advertisements could feature more diversified aesthetics because their purpose does not lie in promoting goods, enabling them to appear more genuine and involved in the cause of gender empowerment. Such candidness



could gain customer loyalty, which helps the company pave the way for subsequent product sales products covertly.

## 7. The Strong Influence of Standardized Gender Beauty Aesthetics

Although some advertisements partly challenge the stereotypical female images by portraying women with bronzed complexions and/or athletic figures as well as emphasizing the significance of being confident and diverse, many are still strongly influenced by gender norms, conforming to contemporary beauty standards and gendered personality frameworks. Many of the female characters in these samples are portrayed as beauties with fair skin and they appear no more than 30 years old. As for personality, some of these females are still represented with traits such as shyness and dependence on men, which are considered conventionally feminine.

This imprint of gender norms could be explained in two ways. On the one hand, as a member of the society who is not likely to escape the effect of the gender frame deeply embedded in the social culture, the producers of the advertisements may design female images according to such frames without knowledge[25]; on the other hand, as an interested party whose benefits greatly depend on the pervasive power of the advertisements, they may be fully aware of it and intentionally utilize it to make the advertisements more adaptable to the potential consumers. As a result, female images with traditional women attributes, like shyness and delicacy, sometimes are preferred by women consumers, especially when shown simultaneously with a male and set in a romantic scene [26]. In addition, allowing for the strong impact of Confucian culture, which has been predominant in China for thousands of years and lays great emphasis on women's obedience toward men [27], it would be more difficult to eliminate this gender frame.

## 8. Conclusion

This study explored how gendered images are portrayed in contemporary Chinese circulating on the internet. Firstly, we collected and analyzed male and female images in advertisements to explore how characters of different genders are portrayed. Male characters featured are either ordinary people with no distinctive external features or young celebrities with attractive attributes—tall, slim, pale-skinned—with non-muscular appearances. While female characters also consist of celebrities, their occupations are more diverse, ranging from bloggers to athletes and to office workers.

In particular, we investigated whether female characters presented in our samples challenge, maintain, or reinforce gender conventions. Regarding their occupations, most female characters are stepping out of the domestic sphere and entering the workforce. Many women are also featured as bloggers, whose freedom of choice and courage in pursuing their passions align with the theme of women's empowerment. Regarding physical appearances of female characters, many advertisements still conform influence of contemporary gendered beauty aesthetics in China, since the bulk of female characters appeared youthful and fair-skinned. Regarding personality, while some female characters possess traditionally feminine traits like shyness and vulnerability, more female characters are portrayed as confident, independent, and ambitious.

Thirdly, we also made an essential distinction between the types of advertisements that we analyzed, categorizing them by product and concept advertisements. By analyzing the difference between gender representations in concept advertisements and product advertisements, we gained more insight into the conflict between consumerism and female empowerment.

Last but not least, this research has its limitations. First, it is limited with regard to the size of the advertisement samples that were selected. Increasing the sample size can enable researchers to analyze advertisements by more brands, thus gaining a more comprehensive understanding of advertising in the beauty industry. Moreover, the scope of this research is limited to advertising within

a single industry in China. Researchers may consider comparing advertising across multiple industries or multiple regions to examine how cultural and regional differences shaped gendered beauty aesthetics.

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## Appendix A

Characters' genders			
Type of advertisement	Female characters	Male characters	Total
Product	79	32	111
Conceptual	60	7	67
All	139	39	178

## Appendix B

The age span of characters in product ads					
Character/Age	≤18	19~30	30~50	>50	Total
Female	2 (2.5%)	61 (77.2%)	15 (19.0%)	1 (1.3%)	79 (100%)
Male	1 (3.1%)	26 (81.2%)	3 (9.4%)	2 (6.3%)	32 (100%)

## Appendix C

The age span of characters in conceptual ads					
Character/Age	≤18	19~30	30~50	>50	Total
Female	0 (0%)	42 (70%)	15 (25%)	3 (5%)	60 (100%)
Male	1	6	0	0	7

## Appendix D

External features of female characters				
Ad type/appearance	Slim and pale-skinned	Ordinary	Defy contemporary beauty standards	Total
Product	56 (70.9%)	17 (21.5%)	6 (7.6%)	79 (100%)
Conceptual	25 (41.7%)	9 (15%)	26 (43.3%)	60 (100%)
All	81	26	32	139

## Appendix E

External features of male characters				
Ad type/appearance	Slim and pale-skinned	Ordinary	Muscular	Defy contemporary beauty standards
Product	14	14	3	1
Conceptual	1	5	1	0
All	15	19	4	1



## Appendix F

Character roles/identities					
Females	Occupation/family role	Occurrence	Males	Occupation/family role	Occurrence
1	Other	52 (37.4%)	1	Other	20 (51.3%)
2	Celebrity	28 (20.1%)	2	Celebrities	14 (35.9%)
3	Blogger	17 (12.2%)	3	Boyfriend	3 (7.7%)
4	Athlete	12 (8.6%)	4	Father	2 (5.1%)
5	Girlfriend	11 (8.0%)		Total	39 (100%)
6	Office worker	7 (5.0%)			
7	Mother	6 (4.3%)			
8	Model	6 (4.3%)			
	Total	139 (100%)			

## Appendix G

Character Personalities					
Females	Personality	Occurrence	Males	Personality	Occurrence
1	Confident and independent	38 (27.3%)	1	Other	24 (61.5%)
2	Other	36 (25.9%)	2	Lively and lovable	5 (12.8%)
3	Bold and ambitious	19 (13.7%)	3	Confident and independent	4 (10.4%)
4	Lively and lovable	9 (6.5%)	4	Bold and ambitious	2 (5.1%)
5	Anxious (about their appearances)	8 (5.8%)	5	Strong-willed	2 (5.1%)
6	Tender and delicate	7 (5.0%)	6	Self-abased	2 (5.1%)
7	Innocent	7 (5.0%)		Total	39 (100%)
8	Composed	6 (4.3%)			
9	Intellectual	5 (3.6%)			
10	Spiteful	4 (2.9%)			
	Total	139 (100%)			

## Appendix H

Advertisement themes							
Type of advertisement	Boldly pursue passions	Independence and confidence	Individuality	Embrace diversity	Other	Indiscernible	Total
Product	2	5	1	3	10	19	40
Conceptual	2	4	5	2	7	0	20
All	4	9	6	5	17	19	60