How powerful is the female gaze? The implication of using male celebrities for promoting female cosmetics in China

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Abstract
In some East Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, and recently, China, there is a popular trend of having male celebrities as brand ambassadors or spokespeople for female cosmetics. This study is situated in the contemporary Chinese market and examines the so-called “Nan Se consumption (nan se xiao fei, 男色消费)” culture, which literally translates into “the consumption of sexualized men” in Chinese. Referring to postfeminism that focuses on female agency and the subjectivity of the female body, this article argues that the shift from “male gaze” to “female gaze,” and the consumption of sexualized men, appear to be revolutionary in terms of evaluating gender power; however, Chinese female consumers’ agency and self-empowerment are still limited by a conditioned neoliberal consumerist culture. The study also proposes that China’s contested “Nan Se consumption” culture reflects the complexity and fluidity of today’s postfeminist theorization.

Keywords
Advertising, China, female gaze, Nan Se consumption, postfeminism

Introduction
If one turns on the television or goes to a shopping mall in China these days, one may be surprised to find that most of the cosmetic brands for women are using male celebrities as their brand ambassadors or spokespeople. According to recent market research, this trend of using males for the promotion of female products has been rising steeply. In the first 7 months of 2018, 18 cosmetic brands have signed male celebrities to promote female-targeted products in the Chinese market (“18 Brands Have Signed ‘Little Fresh Meat,’ Cosmetics Market Entering Nan Se era,” 2018). Most of these brands belong to large transnational corporations, including Lancôme, Maybelline,

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Elizabeth Arden, Sisley, L’Oréal, and so on. Interestingly, this trend seems to be more common in the Pan-East Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, and China, as cosmetics brands in Western countries still use female celebrities to endorse the products most of the time.

This study thus focuses on this trend in China and examines the reversal of the “male gaze,” as women are now gaining more opportunities to judge the sexualized male bodies in the media and then make decisions of consumption. Previous research on gender representation in mass media usually highlighted the objectification of women and the pervasive “male gaze” in which women were overly sexualized, objectified, or even dismembered to be consumed by the patriarchal taste (see Cortese, 1999/2004; Mulvey, 1975). However, through sexualizing men in the ads to attract female consumers, one could sense an overturn of the dominant and gendered discourse.

Recognizing there are contested and debated feminist discourses on women and consumer culture in a neoliberal context, this article applies a postfeminist perspective to identify the pluralistic and intersectional realities faced by Chinese female consumers. The study first explains the discursive and contested nature of postfeminism raised by Western scholarship, and then introduces the “Nan Se consumption” (nan se xiao fei) culture in China, which literally translates into “sexualized men consumption.” Next, by examining two advertisements for women’s skincare products featuring male celebrities as protagonists, this article discusses the sexual and economic empowerment of the Chinese female consumers while also considering the question: how powerful is the “female gaze”? And how much subjectivity and agency do female consumers really gain in a hegemonic society under the influence of neoliberalism and consumerism? The article eventually argues that, while “Nan Se consumption” has enabled Chinese women to gain power through fantasizing and consuming male celebrities’ sexuality, such empowerment is also conditioned and constantly restrained by a traditional, heterosexual, and patriarchal thinking, which reveals the conundrum of postfeminism in the current Chinese society.

From “commodity feminism” to “postfeminism”

Roberts (1998) pointed out that since the 19th century, women in Europe began to bear double roles in the burgeoning consumer culture: “Woman was inscribed as both consumer and commodity, purchaser and purchase, buyer and bought” (p. 818). This observation remains true today, as studies of women being the victims of consumer culture—both physically and economically—have never ceased to exist. However, with the development of feminism, new waves have altered women’s images and roles in consumer culture. Among them was the emergence of “commodity feminism.” According to Gill (2008a), “Commodity feminism refers to the way feminist ideas and icons are appropriated for commercial purposes, emptied of their political significance and offered back to the public in a commodified form—usually in advertising” (para. 1). Such commodification of feminism is often under heated debates in terms of whether it can truly empower women. While advertisers have incorporated the uplifting feminist ideologies in the ads by addressing women’s daily struggles and negotiations with the patriarchy, they have also presented “consumption” as the solution for women. Goldman et al. (1991) criticized such fetishizing of femininity in the name of feminism, noting,

In the context of fragmented demographic categories and fragmented consumer markets, feminism takes on a plurality of faces in the mass media, its potentially alternative ideological force thus channeled through the commodity form in ways that may modify patriarchal hegemony, but bow to capitalist hegemony. (p. 336)
In addition, Hains (2014) studied the two opposing streams of interpreting “commodity feminism” through the comparison between the Riot Grrrls and the Spice Girls. The former criticized consumer culture as a way of exerting female power, while the latter embraced it as a form of self-empowerment. Indeed, with the third-wave feminism and neoliberalism addressing intersectionality and global restructuring of power, the meaning of commodity feminism has become more complicated.

Such a dichotomized interpretation of female empowerment in contemporary times was challenged, or, depending on one’s standpoint, upgraded by the arrival of “postfeminism.” Postfeminism presents a variety of contested arguments derived from the neoliberal consumerist culture. As a result, it is still being debated and continuously problematized by today’s feminist scholarship. Recognizing the morphing and unsettling nature of postfeminism is thus a key to the understanding of the theoretical foundation of this study. McRobbie (2004) defined postfeminism as an “undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism” (p. 255). This statement indicated that women in a postfeminist context acknowledge the plurality and difficulty in defining feminism, and thus consciously making decisions to find alternative ways of exerting agency. Van Bauwel (2018) further explained that McRobbie’s understanding of postfeminism “has been defined as a ‘double entanglement,’ which refers to the coexistence of neoconservative values and liberal values or ‘burgeoning post-feminist culture’” (p. 23). Here, the “undoing” of feminism does not abandon the core feminist agenda of fighting patriarchy but indicates that there have been contested interpretations of female agency.

Also, Gill (2008c) applied a feminist poststructuralist approach to reexamine “sexual agency” concerning today’s burgeoning communication technologies and women’s increased financial independence. Instead of being sexualized objects, she argued,

one of the most significant shifts in advertising in the last decade or more has been the construction of a new figure: a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately lays with her sexual power and is always “up for it” (that is, sex). (p. 41)

This “deliberate knowingness” thus distinguishes postfeminist women from women in the commodity feminist category who either overthrow the standardized sexuality or passively embrace certain established representations. Moreover, Gill (2008b) challenged the standardized idea of “objectification” by asking, “how much purchase does the notion of objectification have at the moment when far from being presented as passive objects of an assumed male gaze (some) women are increasingly presented as active, desiring heterosexual subjects?” (p. 437). This question suggested that the classic accusation of media “objectifying women” should be reexamined because it restrained the more comprehensive, plural, and up-to-date, postfeminist phenomena, which could truly put women and their bodily agency at the center of subjectivity and self-determination. Nash and Grant (2015) concluded that, for Gill, postfeminism was “part of a contemporary neoliberal refashioning of femininity” (p. 981), thus signaling a reconstruction of femininity and feminism in a neoliberalist consumer culture.

Meanwhile, criticism of postfeminism is similar to the commodity feminist accusations, which regards arguments made by the “postfeminists” as another way for capitalism to dominate women’s choices, branding and commercializing consumption as women’s empowerment. Furthermore, critics discussed the prefix “post” in “postfeminism,” saying that it indicated the end of feminism or feminist struggles when it was hardly the case (Hawkesworth, 2004; Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005). For example, while calling Dove’s famous feminist campaign “Real Beauty” as a “postfeminist-supported campaign,” Murray (2013) criticized that “the postfeminist position easily aligns with corporate interests, situating messages of women’s freedom in the
marketplace as ‘empowered consumers’. The emergent neoliberal postfeminist citizen links meanings of empowerment and choice to ideological and material consumption” (p. 86). However, Nash and Grant (2015) argued that the word “post” might also “symbolise a positive association—an ‘in relation to’ rather than a ‘split from’ earlier feminist movements” (p. 981). This study sides with Nash and Grant’s interpretation as it sees postfeminism as a developing feminist agenda in today’s ever-evolving economic culture filled with intertwined ideologies. Thus, postfeminism in the context of this study does not mean a fixed theory but a conundrum reflecting the complex stances of the empowered women living in a society that is highly influenced by the neoliberal market and culture. Moreover, postfeminism is not entirely departed from the previous feminist thoughts but is in the process of “refashioning” from women’s perspectives.

“Nan Se consumption” as a reflection of postfeminism in China

The burgeoning “she economy”

The idea of “she economy” has become prominent in China since about a decade ago when women started to become the major consuming power in the country. Rein (2009) pointed out that, “Not only are they exerting influence on decision-making in their own homes; they’re also making purchase decisions for their parents when they live in the same house or neighborhood” (para. 4). More recently, the popularity of Internet shopping has fostered an even larger scene of “she economy.” As observed by Qiu and Shepherd (2018), there are numerous campaigns and shopping holidays in China all year round, specifically targeting female consumers. For example, the International Women’s Day on March 8, which was initially set to commemorate women’s equal rights movements, has been dubbed “Queens’ Day” or “Goddess Day” by Taobao and Tmall, the largest online retailers in China (“March 8th Goddess Day Consumption Report,” 2018). According to Ali Data, the “she market” in China has been expanding explosively both in size and in amount. Compared to 2015, women’s online expenses in 2017 have increased by 64% from last year (“March 8th Goddess Day Consumption Report 2018,” 2018). Another report published jointly by JD and Vipshop, both e-commerce giants in China, revealed that

In the new era . . . Women began to increase their abilities in many aspects to better themselves . . . Women’s consumption on traveling and reading has shown a steady rise from 2015 to 2017, and continues to grow. (“JD Research Institute: 2018 China Consumption Trend Report by Sexes,” 2018)

These observations and reports highlighted Chinese women’s increased economic power and contribution to the nation’s economy but did not discuss an essential component in this phenomenon, which was the incorporation of “Nan Se” or sexualized men. In fact, to boost women’s consumptive power, the Chinese market has utilized the strategy of selling male sexuality to women. Hence, by focusing on the “Nan Se consumption” culture, this article examines the constructs and complexity of China’s highly women-oriented market and the stance of female consumers in such a postfeminist context.

Consuming the “little fresh meat”

In traditional advertising culture, products for women generally had female celebrities as brand endorsers or spokespersons. However, it has become more common to see male celebrities appearing in ads to sell products that are for women. These male celebrities usually share certain traits.
As Cao (2011) observed, “The men who endorse female cosmetics showcase their sexuality, seductiveness, gentleness, and thoughtfulness, which are the new characteristics of men” (p. 152). Zhou (2017) noted that as Chinese women begin to have more agency and consumptive power, they also become bold to express their preference for men “who are handsome, rich, and having a mild disposition. The ones who have both masculine appearance and feminine temperament are especially popular among young women nowadays” (p. 1).

As the advertising culture began to promote “Na Se,” the term “little fresh meat” (xiao xian rou, 小鲜肉) has also become popular in China. The term contains obvious subtexts: it is sexually coded since “fresh meat” in Chinese can figuratively describe the young and attractive human bodies. The word “little” also emphasizes the person’s age and lack of experience. Luo (2017) explained that, “A ‘Mr. (Little) Fresh Meat’ (Xiao Xian Rou) tags a man with youth and good body shape yet without much social experience or career achievement” (p. 199). However, the popularity of “little fresh meat” actually has its origin in the Pan-East Asian popular culture, particularly from the Japanese and South Korean entertainment industry. As these two countries and China share many cultural signs, products, and influences, the “J-pop” and “Korean Wave” have influenced the Chinese consumers for a long time, even shaking and assimilating people’s tastes and aesthetics across boundaries. One thing that Japanese and Korean popular culture has in common is their prevalent appreciation for the less masculine men, known as bishonen in Japanese and kkot minam in Korean. The former is translated to “pretty boy,” and the latter means “flower handsome boys/men.” Jung (2010) used the term “soft masculinity” to summarize this new kind of male aesthetics (p. 39).

Moreover, some scholars have pointed out that women’s fondness of “soft masculinity” has demonstrated their empowerment. As J. Kim et al. (2013) stated,

The preference of kkot minam was argued to be a sign of increasing women power. As the socioeconomic status of women rises, their changed view of men appears to promote the feminization of men. Women no longer need macho qualities or patriarchal authority from men. (p. 128)

Louie (2012) also observed, “the emergence of a ‘soft’ male ideal in CJK [China, Japan, Korea] culture coincides with the increased buying power of women and the young groups that use the Internet most effectively” (p. 933).

As a result, using male celebrities to sell products for women came about as a successful market endeavor in these countries, as women feel empowered by consuming male sexuality, and the companies also gain tremendous economic success through the branding of the “flower boys” or the “little fresh meat.” In 1995, Kimura Takuya, a Japanese idol from SMAP known for his “androgynous sexual tension,” appeared in a Kanebo ad where he “smeared lipstick over his own face,” which contained obvious sexual connotation (Catton, n.d.). The ad gained unprecedented success, and since then, more and more male celebrities took over the traditionally female-dominant market of cosmetics (Li, 2016). In South Korea, a country that has an almost saturated cosmetics market, some brands used kkot minam instead of female celebrities to make their brands stand out in the competition (J. Kim et al., 2013, p. 128). Korean local brands such as Innisfree, Nature Republic, Mamonde, and so on all have had famous male celebrities as spokesmen. Moreover, when these brands entered China, the marketing strategy is to highlight the kkot minam in order to attract female consumers. “Just put the long-legged oppa [brother] Lee Min-Ho’s full-size billboard at the shop’s front door, the Chinese girls would swarm in,” said a report in 2016 (“Male Celebrities Took Female Celebrities’ Jobs and Endorsing Cosmetics,” 2016).
Some discourses may criticize the “little fresh meat” or male celebrities with “soft masculinity” for lacking professional skills and experience and only using their outstanding appearance to attract female fans; however, given today’s promising fan economy in China, their popularity is largely substantiated by women’s growing economic power and agency. As Wang (2017) observed, “The fans and the stars are now sharing an inseparable destiny as the merchants are making ‘little fresh meat’ into products, ready to be consumed by their powerful [female] fans” (p. 59). Hu (2017) also pointed out,

Women as the main force of consumption can fulfill their inner fantasy [for the “little fresh meat”] by consuming, in addition to attaining visual and sensual excitement from them. This way, women also build a channel for their “male gods” to become more popular, thus exemplifying a new fans consumption culture. (p. 4)

Indeed, by branding these young and attractive men into stars and placing them in ads, the corporations behind them can quickly draw massive female fans’ interests, media traffic, and, consequently, financial gains from the powerful female consumers.

**From male gaze to female gaze**

Tracing the history of “little fresh meat” in a Pan-East Asian context is important, as it recognizes the development of the ideology and discourse of “soft masculinity” during the transmission and communication of popular culture. Moreover, it shows the journey of female consumers’ empowerment through visually and economically consuming the “little fresh meat.” In this process, the traditional “male gaze,” which puts women in the position of being looked at and man being the “bearer of the look” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 62), has become a “female gaze” that enables women to exert their eroticized gaze upon men and thus reverse the traditional power relationship between genders. As the neoliberal market realizes that women have become the new powerhouse of consumption, it quickly puts male celebrities in a relatively passive position, further sexualizing and commercializing them in order to draw more money from women.

Nevertheless, one cannot just pass a dichotomized judgment that women are, again, being used by the capital and market, because the involvement of the sexualized male celebrities has added more layers to the situation. As Zhou (2017) summarized,

Through appreciating men in these ads, contemporary Chinese women could gain tremendous visual pleasure and exert their growing consumptive power and freedom. This shift from consuming female sexuality to “Nan Se consumption,” thus reflects a trend toward gender equality. However, just like the objectification of women, the new images of males in ads are the results of a joint decision among the merchant, media, and other beneficiaries. While media provides pleasure for women, it again intensifies the patriarchal control of women. (p. 5)

This idea echoed Rosenfelt and Satecy’s (1990) observation of postfeminism, which stated that it could be “an emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises, and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by feminism” (as cited in Nash & Grant, 2015, p. 981). While capitalism wins no matter what, it is still important to acknowledge the tremendous female agency, economic power, and the female consumers’ deliberate decision of whether to consume or not. Meanwhile, the dilemma about postfeminism still exists: as there is a growing trend of “female gaze” caused by the “Nan Se consumption” culture, the question of “who
Li

is the product” complicates the previously either/or model in the commodity feminist debate.
Undoubtedly, as male celebrities are objectified and sexualized for today’s “she economy,” they
are the “products” in the eyes of the merchants and the female consumers. However, besides wom-
en’s active participation in consumption, their support for male celebrities is also being commer-
cialized to boost sales; thus, these female consumers can also become products according to the
corporate agenda.

**Method: critical discourse analysis**

This study has applied a postfeminist perspective to layout the contextual background for assessing
China’s “she economy” and “Nan Se consumption” culture. The standpoint lies in the understand-
ing that today’s neoliberal and consumerist culture has cultivated Chinese women’s unprecedented
economic power and expression of desire, causing the market to be more oriented toward them and
giving them opportunities to become the subjects of consumption instead of the objects being con-
sumed. However, this recognition should not conceal the structural power embedded in the current
postfeminist discourse. In fact, when looking at ads that incorporated women’s consumption of the
“little fresh meat,” many have revealed the deeply rooted patriarchal assumptions of women and
their roles to men. Thus, the following case study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to exam-
ine two advertisements, because this method critically and effectively tackles the discursive and
social practices of some social issues and pinpoints the structural power relationship embedded in
them. As Wodak and Meyer (2009) explained,

CDA as a school or paradigm is characterized by a number of principles . . . all approaches are problem-
oriented . . . Moreover, CDA is characterized by the common interests in de-mystifying ideologies and
power through the systematic and retroductable investigation of semiotic data (written, spoken or
visual). (p. 3)

In terms of the practice of CDA, a widely used model is the “three-dimensional model” devel-
oped by Norman Fairclough, which focuses on the textual, discursive, and social practices of dis-
courses. Fairclough (2010) referred to Gramsci’s theorization of hegemony in his elaboration of
the method, stressing that “hegemonic struggle and practice take the form of discursive practice,
reproduction and negotiation of power relations” (p. 130). Richardson (2007) further dissected the
practice of Fairclough’s “three-dimensional model” and explained that the textual analysis “exam-
ines the representations, identities and social relations, as well as cohesion and coherence of texts”
(p. 38). The discursive practice is “the processes involved in the production and consumption of
texts” and “is always socially constructed” (p. 75). Finally, one needs to look at the social practice
around the discourse to reach an ideological level of analysis and thus drawing out the implications
of the discursive “social wrongs.”

Moreover, advertising is a complex structure of meaning, and each ad provides discourse that is
socially constructed and power-driven. As Williamson (2004) stated, advertising “has a function,
which is to sell things to us. But it has another function . . . It creates structures of meaning”
(pp. 11–12). Indeed, besides promoting the product and attracting the public’s attention, on an
ideological level, advertising reflects the dominant values and ideas of those who created it, which
makes the context—or the culture or society in which the ad is situated—an important element to
consider. Obviously, “Nan Se consumption” in China contains a capital-driven power structure that
creates an intricate situation for women. For example, they can exert their economic power to
consume both the male body and the products, yet their power and desire could also become franchises for the companies to further exploiting their money. Therefore, to elucidate such an interplay of power in the form of advertising, CDA is the most suitable method in this context.

Case study: the “little fresh meat” in advertisements

To further explain women’s position in China’s prominent “Nan Se consumption” culture, two advertisements are chosen for this study. The criteria for choosing the ads are based on two things: first, both the brand and the male celebrity are nationally renowned; second, the ad is selling skincare or cosmetic product that is predominantly targeting and consumed by women. After searching for major transnational cosmetic brands’ names together with the Chinese word for “advertisement” (guang gao) on YouTube, two ads stood out for both having a well-known male celebrity as the protagonist and showing rich content, careful editing, and a situation for female consumers to gaze at a man. The first ad is produced by Olay, which featured actor Yifeng Li, and the second ad is made by SK-II, which stars actor Wallace (Jianhua) Huo. Both ads are selling a facial essence product for women, but with slightly different approaches. More specifically, the Olay ad makes Li tell an autobiography, while the SK-II ad shows—instead of tells—a warm family scene, inviting the viewers to be with Huo.

Also, although Fairclough’s “three dimensions” have distinguished focuses, in practice, the textual and discursive practices of a given media text may be combined or intertwined. Especially for a multimedia text like an advertisement, the visual and textual data are always closely linked with the method of production. As Richardson (2007) noted, discursive practice is “the processes involved in the production and consumption of texts” and “is always socially constructed” (p. 75). Thus, this case study combines the textual and discursive analyses to decipher the brands’ and advertisers’ construction of a postfeminist discourse in the “Nan Se consumption” culture.

The pleasure of looking in the Olay ad

In the Olay ad, the camera follows Yifeng Li as he walks through a corridor into a big reading room while reviewing his 9-year career. Here, Mulvey’s study on visual pleasure and “male gaze” can be adapted to understand the camera’s choice of angles, except that they clearly serve the female interest in this context. Mulvey (1975) studied how film has created the pleasure of looking from the perspective of a male. According to her, cinema generates a kind of pleasure called “scopophilia,” meaning that “looking itself is a source of pleasure” (p. 8). Based on Freudian interpretation, Mulvey explained, “he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (p. 8). Thus, the gazer, presumably a man, is active, voyeuristic, and maintaining a hidden position. The viewers are not satisfied with just being submerged in the atmosphere, but they also want to enjoy the details of the object at which they are gazing. Such a desire often contains sexual connotation and erotic pleasure.

Conversely, in a “Nan Se consumption” culture, the Olay ad is all about the voyeuristic female gaze, which turns into a detailed examination of the male body. As the ad starts, the camera, representing the female viewers’ perspective, only shows Li’s back. The camera uses panning to gradually get closer to the back of his head, shifts to his fingers as they are touching a wooden table, and goes up to his neck, ears, and finally, shows him turning around, exposing himself to the viewers. The overall ambiance of the ad is dark, quiet, and mysterious, creating a private atmosphere with only the viewer and the actor. Moreover, the background piano music starts heavy and slow, yet as
Li walks from the narrow corridor into the large reading room, with a beam of light suddenly touching his face, the piano also crescendos to create some tension and uplifting sensation in the room.

Meanwhile, the change of visual signs is simultaneous with the content of Li’s monologue, which contains the ideology that this brand is trying to convey as well. In the beginning, when the ad is mysterious and dark, Li recalls his experience from 9 years ago and stresses the difficulties he has encountered by saying that, “[I] have started all over many times. Whenever I tried to change, I’ve been doubted. Facing the unknown, I’ve hesitated too.” His voice is calm, but his facial expression is a little scattered and lost, making him look vulnerable in front of the female viewers. However, as he enters the bigger room and is exposed to a broader space, his voice and body language also become more confident and comfortable. He says, “I don’t want to be limited. Will I dare to challenge myself to become a better me?” From this point on, he also seems to possess more agency, reflected by the action of him flipping a vinyl record and playing it. Next, the camera shows Li speaking without looking at the viewers: “Change is not to compromise, but to believe in yourself. You can be what you want to be only when you decide to change.” While the ad reaches the climax, the background music suddenly stops, causing a second of silence. Then, the scene blacks out and comes back again, this time showing Li sitting on a sofa and slowly turning around to the viewers. The piano notes also come back with the ticking of a clock in the background, which is likely to symbolize the passing of time and age. This time, Li shows an expression as if he is being called out by the viewer. He seems a little surprised but with a soft smile on his face. He finally says, “you are more than just you,” which is the slogan of the product.

The filming strategy used in the ad is a good example of the reversal of the conventional “male gaze.” As Mulvey observed,

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (p. 62)

However, in the context of “Nan Se consumption,” female fantasy is projected onto the male body. Female viewers are in a dominant position, ready to gaze. The fact that the camera pans and examines the details of Li’s body, especially the exposed skin area like his neck, ear, fingers, and of course, the delicate and handsome face, provide a rounded, sexually coded object (i.e. “little fresh meat”) to be looked at and potentially consumed.

The identification and fantasy in the SK-II ad

The SK-II ad featuring Wallace Huo shares some similarities with the Olay ad in terms of the continuous rendering of the female gaze. Huo is the only character in the ad to be looked at, and the camera follows him around to show different angles of him. However, rather than creating a voyeuristic tension, this ad invites the female viewers to be part of the relationship with the star. The ad applies a second-person perspective, making the female viewer feel that Huo is her boyfriend or husband who is talking directly to her.

At the beginning of the ad, a question appears on the white background: “When is the most beautiful time?” Then, soft piano music flows out, and the camera leads the viewer, that is, “you” to Huo, who is preparing breakfast at the kitchen counter. He is in an entirely white studio and wearing white clothes, exhibiting a sense of cleanliness and purity. As “you” walk closer to him, he glares at you, smiles with affection, and then pats your head (which is actually him patting the
upper part of the lens of the video camera). Next, the camera shifts the scene and shows him sitting on a sofa in the living room while reading a magazine. After a while, he starts to drink a glass of water. The camera again moves closer to him, creating a feeling that it is “you” who are staring at him doing all these mundane actions on a peaceful Sunday morning.

The third scene changes from inside to outside, as Huo stands in the snow, showing his back to “you.” He is still wearing all white, and the camera approaches him to help “you” get closer to him. Next, Huo turns around, looking at “you” without saying a word, but his expression is affectionate. The final scene brings “you” back to the living room where Huo lies in bed with an opened book in his hands. As “you” get closer to him again, there is finally voice-over, saying, “The most beautiful time is when I meet you,” thus answering the question at the beginning of the ad. Finally, the scene fades, and the SK-II products appear on the screen.

Different from the Olay ad in which Li speaks the entire time about himself, in the SK-II ad, Huo does not say a word (even the voice at the end is just a voice-over) but only communicates with the viewer through eye contacts, facial expressions, and slight body movements. To some extent, Huo is objectified in the sense that he is presented more as a decorative figure that blends harmoniously with the surrounding environment, trying to make the female viewers feel loved. Therefore, the viewers experience a shift of the traditional, heterosexual power relationship represented by the media. As women, they can now gaze, observe, and appreciate the male celebrity as he unfolds himself in front of them and even serves them. Instead of portraying a masculine, dominant male character, the tenderness of Huo’s movements, the pure and untainted appearance, the fact that he is preparing breakfast, reading a book by himself, gently smiling at you, and waiting for you in bed, all demonstrate a “soft masculinity” which is caring and non-aggressive. He is there for the female viewers to consume and to fantasize, instead of giving orders or exerting control.

The design of this ad is much like the Japanese otome games, which enable a female player to use an avatar to establish a romantic relationship with a virtual boyfriend. It is easy for players to generate a sense of identification while playing. Referring to Lacan’s “mirror stage” theory, an infant sees the mirror for the first time and identifies itself with the image in the mirror. However, the self in the mirror is an “ideal-I” that appears in its totality, which is intangible for the “real I.” This indicates a distance or distortion of perception in the process of identification and self-realization. As Lacan (2004) explained,

[T]his form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality. (p. 95)

Moreover, H. Kim (2009) pointed out that, “Identification in the gamer-avatar relationship also embodies the complexities of desire and positioning” (p. 167), which explained that the gamers are not only playing the game as the avatar but also seeing through the avatar with their perceptions and interpretations. The SK-II ad, in this case, shares many similarities with the otome games because the female viewers are hailed to interact with the male celebrity as if he is their virtual boyfriend. Such interaction is not mutual without the viewer identifying herself with an “imagined I,” which is also an “ideal-I” that is placed in the ad in the form of totality. Meanwhile, Huo possesses a passive, objectified body, which makes female viewers feel that they have power and agency since they can explore him; however, his carefully staged actions actually provide the female viewers with a false sense of “owning,” which only satisfies their fantasy and desire.
Kim also suggested that *otome* games could empower female players because the players could socialize and experiment with various identities and fantasies through playing. Thus, it is not just the game genre that empowers the players but also the players’ interaction with the games that contribute to their empowerment (p. 184). Similarly, by providing diverse scenarios and positioning an imagined role as Huo’s “girlfriend” for the female viewers, the SK-II ad not only applies an untraditional approach to alter the power relationship between men and women in terms of who is the object being gazed, but also offers the female viewers, who are the potential consumers, with ample amount of space to freely and openly place themselves in the scenes and initiate their agency to fantasize. Hence, it is totally up to the female viewers to decide what they want to do or say to Huo when he is preparing breakfast in the morning or reading in bed at night. No matter what they have imagined, they would always get a positive response from him.

**Critical analysis and implications**

In the third dimension of Fairclough’s CDA, it is essential to synthesize the social significance and power relationship that emerged from the textual and discursive findings, and together present a critical reading of the cases and their implications. As Jäger and Maier (2009) stated, “the critical discourse analyst needs to be clear about the fact that her critique is not situated outside discourse—as this would contradict the fundamental assumptions of discourse analysis. The analyst can—and has to—take a stand” (p. 36). Thus, the social analysis in CDA should be anchored in the textual data and also be synthesized by the researcher’s subjective and critical evaluations.

Gill (2008c) considers women’s agency as a “compulsory” and “required feature of contemporary postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivity,” and the refashioned femininity in a postfeminist context shows women’s “autonomous self-determination,” which means that they have the autonomy to choose either to consume or not. Either way, they make proactive decisions and “knowingly and deliberately play with her sexual power” (pp. 40–41). The above study of the two ads has also demonstrated how “Nan Se consumption” culture has enabled Chinese female consumers to exert their agency and attain empowerment by consuming the sexualized male celebrities. Unlike the traditional gender roles portrayed in mass media which put women in a submissive position ready to be judged by the male gaze, women in today’s “Nan Se consumption” culture or “she economy” have the opportunity to exert a “reserved gaze” which allows them to actively examine the male bodies and actions, as well as deciding how to make use of their own agency and economic power. From a postfeminist perspective, these women’s freedom of consumption, both visually and economically, have demonstrated the “deliberate knowingness” proposed by Gill, since they can choose to either consume the sexuality of men or expose their own subjectivity by willingly buying into this new consumption model.

Also, the postfeminist viewpoint has helped layout the contextual and theoretical background for this study as well. Chinese female consumers’ active rendering of economic power, agency, and expression of desire are all revealed in today’s “she economy,” which is a direct outcome of the neoliberal consumerist culture. However, what is left untouched is the analysis of the power relationship and patriarchal structure overarching the discourse, which is also the limitation of using postfeminism to examine Chinese women’s consumption of sexualized men comprehensively.

For example, interpellation is a strategy that has been used by advertisers extensively, in which case the viewer feels that he or she is being addressed as an individual by a higher power. First
raised by Althusser (1972/2014), interpellation was part of his Marxist theorization of state power and ideology, as he wrote,

We shall go on to suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way as to “recruit subjects among individuals . . . or transforms” individuals into subjects . . . through the very precise operation that we call interpellation or hailing. (p. 190)

When examining the “Nan Se” ads in China, interpellation has even become a requirement as the female viewers are being addressed as “you,” and the male celebrities directly stare at the camera to emphasize the specialness of “you.” According to the theory of interpellation, this action is power-laden and imposes the dominant ideologies onto the target subjects.

Moreover, Althusser indicated that “the existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (p. 191). In other words, ideology, or the ruling idea of those who hold power, is usually ingrained in the action of hailing; therefore, the unequal power relationship is embedded in the media’s rendering of discourses and representations. As a result, in “Nan Se” ads, although women can exert their “reversed gaze” to observe male celebrities’ sexualized bodies and actions, they are still constrained in an idealized, power-laden heterosexual relationship that eventually serves the corporate agenda and reinforces the patriarchy.

Another issue with the two ads is that they have both indicated that men could provide solutions to women, which also reflects the long-lasting gender stereotypes. In the Olay ad, Li tells the female viewers to believe they are more than who they are, while in the SK-II ad, Huo uses his mundane and tender actions to provide a supposedly ideal partnership to please the female viewers, making them feel loved. Here, the advertisers have revealed several gendered assumptions. First, that male celebrities have more authority in convincing women to believe in certain things (e.g. that the product they endorse works). Second, women need to be taken care of by men and loved by men in order to be empowered. Thus, the advertisers not only commercialize male celebrities but also commercialize “women’s needs” to construct an ideology that suggests consuming men equals acquiring happiness and self-empowerment.

While acknowledging the limitation of the postfeminist approach for lacking critical examination of the power structure, the reason that this study still anchors itself in a postfeminist perspective, instead of a commodity feminist one, is due to the complexity and intersectionality of China’s current market under the influence of neoliberalism and consumerist culture. Besides, China’s “neoliberalism” is inevitably entangled with the traditional culture and the Communist party-state’s ideologies. As a result, the emergence of “Nan Se consumption” culture produces many unprecedented phenomena and is continuously evolving to reveal more controversies and endeavors that could shed light on female consumers’ changing positionalities in today’s Chinese society.

To sum up, the use of “little fresh meat” in ads for female products has challenged the male-dominant discourse in the field of advertising and populated the trend of men as products to be consumed by women. However, this does not shake the exploitative nature of consumerist culture because female consumers’ economic power and their love for these male celebrities have also been branded and commercialized. Meanwhile, although Chinese women’s sexual and economic agency has increased, it is also true that the ideological foundation of their consumption is based on a culturally established, heterosexual, gender-coded traditional value: as revealed in the case study, they are still pursuing a relationship with men in which they are the ones finding self-worth in men’s words. And, the brands and advertisers keep conveying the message that men can provide solutions to women’s problems. Thus, while their “female gaze” and consumption of the
sexualized men appear to be revolutionary, the creed of patriarchy is still implanted in the consumption. In a word, China’s “Nan Se consumption” culture and women’s empowerment have shown an intertwined relationship, which also exhibits the traits of the postfeminist dilemma. As women have more agency to render their economic and sexual power in a neoliberal market, they are also constrained by the hegemonic ideologies and thus have to constantly negotiate with the dominant patriarchal discourses to find their positionality in society. This interwoven relationship, again, highlights the fluidity of postfeminism and the unsettling nature of the ongoing development of a neoliberal China.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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