

# Female Empowerment Advertising Discourse Shaping from a Post-Feminist Perspective: A Case Study of Sina Weibo

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**Abstract:** The internet has facilitated the global spread of female empowerment advertising. While achieving significant commercial success, these ads have been criticized for their post-feminist discourse, which might worsen gender inequality. This paper interprets the concept of "female empowerment advertising" through a post-feminist lens, references prior studies, and examines typical cases to outline four main discursive dimensions of such advertising. Research shows that while these ads seem to sculpt an image of independent women, the underlying logic still aligns with traditional male views of femininity or a pursuit of male power, essentially representing a pseudo-independence. Future discursive expressions in female empowerment advertising must authentically represent women's diversity without diminishing other subjects to accurately convey the consciousness of female self-liberation in the post-feminist era.

**Keywords:** Post-feminism; Female Advertising; Female Discourse; Social Media.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Female Empowerment Advertising

Female empowerment advertising, also known as femvertising, first appeared in discussions during an advertising week panel hosted by the website "SheKnows" in 2014 (Ciambrello, 2014). Such advertising is defined as "utilizing pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls" (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). Compared to other types of advertising, femvertising is distinct in its advocacy to break and question the stereotypical portrayal of women created by ads, using supportive female messages and images to empower women (Eisend, 2010). By employing positive gender consciousness as a marketing tool, femvertising quickly resonates emotionally with audiences through narrative storytelling or visual cues, prominently featuring women who are confident and autonomous in public spaces, thereby rapidly narrowing the psychological distance with consumers. Several successful female empowerment advertising campaigns have demonstrated the substantial benefits embedded in femvertising (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016).

### 1.2. Post-Feminism

The concept of "female empowerment" pre-dates its use in advertising, arising partially from the advent of post-feminism ("Post-feminism"). The term "post-feminism" will be uniformly used in this paper.

Some scholars argue that the definition of "post-feminism" remains vague, often synonymously used with terms like "anti-feminism," "retrogression," "enlightened sexism," "new traditionalism," and "third-wave feminism," blurring its distinction from other popular sentiments (Jolles & Marjorie, 2012). They suggest that one characteristic of post-feminism is its "highly individualistic, female-centric cultural representation," a product of combining "individualism" and "anti-feminism." Butler J. argues that post-feminists are essentially anti-feminists. The only thing post-feminists

demand is that women "become whoever they want to be" as long as they are not "feminists."

Currently, academic perspectives on the relationship between "post-feminism" and "feminism" primarily diverge into three views: one, post-feminism as an internal critique within feminism; two, an anti-feminist stance; and three, a blend of feminism and anti-feminism. This paper supports the third view, which implies that on one hand, post-feminism believes that the societal changes aimed by second-wave feminism have largely been achieved, thus no further radicalism is needed (Weitz, 2016). Yet, simultaneously, the pursuit of independence and freedom by women has not fundamentally changed, meaning the effort to advance women's rights continues.

In this context, individualism, choice, and empowerment are seen as contemporary pathways for women to gain independence and freedom, with consumerism being positively accepted. This suggests that under the influence of post-feminism, women's self-identity and acceptance linked with consumerist activities are not contradictory, but rather closely intertwined. The "post-feminism" employed in this paper aligns with this third stance, combining feminism and anti-feminism.

This combination theory of post-feminism views the issue of gender equality as already resolved (sometimes referred to as an "imagined success"), and defines femininity as a physical attribute, returning to the notion of natural gender differences (Butler, 2013). This recognition of natural gender differences does not signify a return to traditional female roles but encourages women's self-enhancement and transformation. If feminism initially sought women's liberation through bodily liberation, post-feminism seeks it through "consumption" as a means for women to achieve self-worth, self-realization, and self-satisfaction.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Post-Feminism and Female Empowerment Advertising Narratives

"Narrative" refers to a text that recounts real or fictional events (Genette, 1980:4). Western scholars generally agree that female empowerment advertising narratives extensively utilize post-feminist discourse. The modern world has experienced two climaxes of feminist movements: the first occurred from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, where feminist activists challenged traditional labor divisions and sought women's rights as human beings in male-dominated public spheres, achieving notable advancements in voting, education, and employment (Li Yinhe, 2005:28). The second wave occurred in the 1960s and 1970s in America, where feminists argued that despite apparent gender equality, the disparity between sexes must be eradicated to address women's subordinate status to men.

Post-feminism emerged in the late 20th century and is characterized by a diverse and mixed set of ideas, representing a transformation and reinterpretation of previous feminist thoughts (Whelehan, 2010). Key concepts include recognizing femininity as a bodily attribute; emphasizing the shift from objectification to subjectification for women; stressing self-monitoring and discipline by women; focusing on individualism and the concept of "empowerment"; highlighting the need for women to change their dressing styles; and a resurgence of natural gender difference perspectives (Gill, 2007). Overall, post-feminism employs certain feminist notions of "rights" and "liberation," implying that "women have already achieved equality, thus feminism is no longer necessary," subtly suggesting that gender discrimination and inequality are no longer significant issues today. Women can live as their "independent agents," free from societal structural constraints (Murray, 2013). The post-feminist trend has also been criticized as being detached from society and collective, rooted in individualistic thought streams (Lazar, 2014). Scholars argue that an excessive focus on individual achievements has forsaken the battles fought by previous generations of feminists and avoided current gender inequalities in society (Varghese & Kumar, 2020).

Since post-feminism no longer examines whether women align with the epistemology of women's liberation, but emphasizes individual independence through consumption and participation in the global capitalist system, it pieces together elements of feminism and femininity through compulsive consumption to enhance women's identification. Additionally, some symbols or signifiers carrying post-feminist elements have begun to be borrowed by film and advertising narratives. Film works excel in showcasing characters' extraordinary personal capabilities and elegant tastes through expensive attire, handbags, and explicitly priced goods, making it easier for consumers to be influenced by purchasing the same products to emulate the protagonist's "perfect life" and gain identity affirmation (Xiang Zhiyi, Lu Di, 2020). "Empowerment" has also become an empty signifier applicable to any product or service aimed at women. "Consumer-based empowerment" has now transcended cultural barriers and historical settings, becoming a circulating cultural capital in today's world. During the development of female empowerment advertising, a series of framing narratives have gradually formed. Some scholars have summarized six commonly seen post-feminist discourse elements in advertisements, namely: commodity feminism,

individualization, self-surveillance, a new lens on the embrace of femininity, confidence culture, and love your body. Female empowerment advertisements often employ multiple discourses, with confidence culture being the most frequently used (Windels, Champlin, Shelton, Sterbenk & Poteet, 2020).

### 2.2. Female Empowerment Advertising's Commercial and Social Benefits

In terms of commercial benefits, studies comparing the impact of female empowerment advertisements with traditional advertisements on female consumers have shown that participants exposed to empowerment messages develop more positive attitudes (Drake, 2017). Experiments have found that after viewing female empowerment ads, consumers' attitudes towards the ads and their purchasing intentions significantly increase (Åkestam, Rosengren & Dahlen, 2017). However, other studies have found no significant correlation between consumers' attitudes towards advertisements and their purchasing intentions because consumers can detect emotional manipulation towards women in ads, realizing that advertisements are merely another strategy for selling products, and thus developing a rebellious sentiment (Kapoor & Munjal, 2019).

On the social benefits side, experiments have shown that empowerment ads can save women's physical and mental health by boosting "self-esteem" and enhancing the sense of female empowerment (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). Research has observed that an increasing number of female work roles in advertisements influence women entering the labor market, making some viewers feel the power of women (Grover & Hundal, 2014; Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016). To further understand consumer feedback on female empowerment ads, Yang et al. (2019) developed data mining programs to categorize comments from Dove advertisements on the video website YouTube, discovering that the most common topics were definitions of beauty and praise for the advertisement, followed by skepticism towards the advertisement.

## 3. Analysis: Female Empowerment Advertising Narratives from a Post-Feminist Perspective on Sina Weibo

This study utilizes thematic analysis to identify and analyze the expression of post-feminist discourse in female empowerment advertisements on Chinese social media, specifically focusing on Sina Weibo. In selecting research samples, on one hand, the advertising issuing bodies were used as indices for collection, and through the world's largest comprehensive brand consulting company, Interbrand, the "Top 100 Global Brands" and the "Top 50 Chinese Brands" of 2021 were screened. Brands related to women's products, such as women's clothing and cosmetics, were selected, ultimately resulting in 16 brands. From these, a total of 21 samples were collected on Weibo. On the other hand, using the keywords "female advertisement," "woman advertisement," and "girl advertisement," videos on Sina Weibo with more than 10,000 views were screened, yielding a total of 65 samples. After reviewing these 86 samples, duplicates and samples without main characters or significant advertising plots were eliminated, resulting in 73 video advertisement samples.

### **3.1. Strong Successful Women: Post-Feminist Discourse Based on Individualism**

In the sample advertisements, female roles are mostly depicted as managers with more economic and political power, film and television stars, or professionals in science, education, health, and culture, with few housewives featured. The ads shape a series of women with outstanding personal achievements, encouraging women to focus on career development and personal improvement, conveying the individualistic viewpoint of "success or failure is all about personal effort; I can do it, and so can you." A significant concern of post-feminism is that it considers past feminists to have exaggerated gender inequality issues and denies women's "victim" status, advocating that women voluntarily overcome gender-based inequalities.

On one hand, many sample ads tend to attribute women's career success solely to their personal efforts, thereby encouraging women to look inward for ways to empower themselves. In these ads, well-known artists, sports stars, and other successful women serve as protagonists, showcasing their "success" stories. For example, the magazine "Her Publication" filmed an ad titled "Reshaping My Name" that featured 12 women who have succeeded in business, film, education, and entertainment, conveying to the audience that women can achieve career success through personal effort. The use of post-feminist discourse on individualism in these ads is also reflected in their skillful use of images of women breaking physical limits in sports to promote "self-choice." Advertisers simplify the concept of women's physical strength and their ability to face adversity, indirectly telling women to seek solutions as "individuals," where personal success or failure "is just like sports," based on their personal choices and efforts, essentially still emphasizing their success due to personal merits rather than questioning the reasons behind women's developmental dilemmas.

On the other hand, sample ads not only avoid presenting and discussing gender discrimination but also construct a minority of "oppressed" male roles. For example, in an ad by the sports brand Under Armour for the martial artist Zhang Weili titled "UA X Zhang Weili: It's Not Over With Me," a segment deliberately includes Zhang defeating a male opponent. In the ad, her expression is serious, her gaze firm, and the male character is quickly knocked down, appearing easily defeated. Such advertising settings suggest that men in society are not only not the leaders in the workplace but are also very easy to overcome.

Thus, the ads not only extensively showcase protagonists who excel in appearance, speech, and dress over ordinary women, but they are also placed in hypothetical scenarios filled with opportunities and free from any restrictions. Sun Guirong (2007) discussed the issue of feminism's development in China and noted that some elite intellectuals generalize the opportunities for upward mobility gained during the social transition period; however, during this time, inevitably some women, not by personal choice, fail to access resources and move downward. For relatively disadvantaged elderly women and young women from the working class, popular phrases like "personal choice" and "self-improvement" are less applicable, and such avoidance of gender inequality brings new harm and injustice (McRobbie, 2004).

### **3.2. Disappointed Growth: Post-Feminist Discourse Based on Commodity Feminism**

Based on commodity feminism, the post-feminist discourse is manifested by direct assignment of progressive feminist significance to products. Thematic analysis has revealed that to highlight the importance of the product and its progressive implications, advertisements create a narrative "low" for women, followed by the arrival of products symbolizing elegant lifestyles and advanced gender attitudes, leading to a transformation and "crowning" of women from non-feminists to "new women." In the discourse of commodity feminism, feminism has been simplified to "an object, a look, or a style" that can be worn as an attitude and a fashion statement (Goldman, Heath & Smith, 1991).

To showcase the importance of products, female characters in ads are typically presented in a passive state or with a negative mindset initially. For example, in the Meituan e-commerce advertisement "Thank You for Being There," although the women are placed within workplace settings and there are no scenes of women shopping in consumer spaces, the major turning point of the ad comes when the women receive a gift. Several women in difficult situations suddenly burst into smiles; their previous passive postures and negative emotions in the face of fatigue and pain are swept away as they enjoy gifts like flowers and neck massagers, subsequently showcasing their positive performances at work. Hence, the advertisement conveys to the audience that women's work capabilities can be enhanced through consumption and accepting external material help. Commodity feminism directly links women's capabilities to consumer behavior.

### **3.3. Self-Reconciliation and the Beauty Attainers: Post-Feminist Discourse Based on Confidence Culture**

Confidence culture is one of the more common post-feminist discourse elements in female empowerment advertisements. Targeting women's anxieties about their appearance and body, the ads encourage women to accept and love their current states. Analysis has shown that although advertisers advocate expanding the boundaries of beauty through confidence, they overlook the fact that female aesthetics have long been dominated by a patriarchal society, and this discourse is a narrative method that uses women's psychological labor to avoid societal aesthetic stereotypes.

In the sample ads, besides characters who fit traditional aesthetics, there are also a few middle-aged and relatively fuller-bodied characters. These advertisements encourage women who do not conform to traditional aesthetics to believe that "confidence is beautiful" and that "women's capabilities redefine the rules of beauty." In a Dove advertisement customized for China, titled "100 Kinds of Girls, 100 Kinds of Beauty," a woman who is unable to face her bare face due to being overweight is deeply moved when she sees the happy smile in her childhood photos and decides to regain a confident mindset, no longer caring about others' gazes. In the video, she tearfully says, "I want to tell my younger self, no matter what you become in the future, maintain this mindset, always be happy." Faced with society's strong disciplinary power over women's bodies, this relatively fuller-bodied girl is asked to reflect on her own lack of self-belief and to continually remind herself to change her perceptions. However, the post-feminist discourse on

confidence culture promoted is not real confidence but is based on "resistance" and "reflection," emphasizing that women should resist existing beauty standards and convince themselves they possess an attractive, self-consistent "self" and reconciliation. Further, confidence culture attributes women's lack of confidence in their appearance to their own beliefs rather than to male-dominated aesthetics, making women realize they also have psychological weaknesses, which brings stronger self-regulation for women.

The confidence culture strategy in the sample ads is also applied to women who fit traditional aesthetics. Although the ads introduce diverse, non-traditional aesthetic female images, young, slim women dressed in figure-enhancing clothes or posing in sexy positions still dominate mainstream advertisements, effectively maintaining the existing standards of beauty. Under the guise of confidence discourse, some women may interpret compliance with aesthetic stereotypes as a joyful self-choice and gradually evolve into a brave, avant-garde part of women's empowerment (Thompson & Donaghue, 2014).

### 3.4. Facing Challenges: Post-Feminist Discourse Based on a Positive Attitude

In the sample advertisements, the majority of female characters exhibit a positive attitude, managing to awaken themselves from narrative lows to transform their mindsets from negative to positive, thereby demonstrating "positive energy" and "big-heartedness," and showing control over their own lives and rights. For example, in an advertisement shot by the brand OSM (Oushi Man), titled "Don't Teach Us How to Be Women," three female characters are questioned about their capabilities and appearances at work, yet they always maintain a positive attitude and actively confront these challenges.

Additionally, the sample ads repeatedly present the theme of "mutual aid" among women. In ads featuring multiple female characters, the vast majority of female roles display a friendly "helping" attitude towards other women, with only four instances of female characters exhibiting "hostile" relationships, characterized by questioning each other's appearances and figures. Female mutual aid is shown in the ads as women collaborating to complete tasks, overcoming stalkers together, or engaging in leisure/sports activities together. For example, in an advertisement by the brand Ziran Tang (Natural Hall), a young girl entering the photography industry frequently faces gender-based skepticism from male supervisors. However, thanks to her strong personal qualities and her mother's support, by the end of the ad, this woman has grown into a "somewhat famous" photographer within the circle.

In this post-feminist discourse based on a positive attitude, on one hand, women are endowed with virtues such as perseverance, bravery, kindness, and helpfulness. On the other hand, a positive attitude is also shaped as the key factor for women to overcome difficulties and break free from challenging situations to become "major female protagonists." Further, this narrative shapes positive-minded women as "role models," implying that the key to overcoming difficulties lies in adjusting one's own mindset—a kind of idealistic viewpoint that avoids discussing the root causes of difficulties and the institutional factors involved in overcoming them.

## 4. Conclusion

The analysis has revealed that under the prolonged influence of consumer culture and post-feminist culture, the "pseudo-empowerment" featured in female empowerment advertisements actually achieves a "true domestication" effect. Reviews indicate that consumers have constructed a logical relationship where "empowerment" equals an individual "achieving beauty," and have shown acceptance and approval for hidden elements of "confidence" and "positive attitudes" as forms of self-discipline. While the female images in the ads appear diverse, they are still predominantly office workers, frontline workers, and those conforming to traditional aesthetics. Non-office workers, leaders, and fuller figures serve as symbols of "breaking stereotypes" as mere embellishments. Barrett (2014) pointed out that "stereotypes are the most rigorous way of observing gender differences in the mass media." Ads using post-feminist discourse create a "new female" image that, despite advocating "against stereotypes," actually tells a story of gentle and kind weaklings who, through personal effort, become "bright and beautiful," thereby facilitating "women's voluntary agreement with and their internalization of oppression" (Barrett, 2014), and encouraging women to consume by baiting them with "advanced gender consciousness" and "beauty attainment." As such, women's "empowerment" is abstracted from its social context and political-economic implications, and is instead constructed as a pursuit of an "ideal body with feminine qualities," reflecting a trend where audiences internalize patriarchal discipline as "self-consciousness" (Bartky, 2020). Although some reviews can identify the domesticating intent of empowerment discourse in ads, the majority of consumer feedback that is positive and accepts the domesticated empowerment discourse remains mainstream.

In the process of advertising awards and the formulation of related advertising laws and regulations, it is necessary to be wary of the harm caused by post-feminist discourse that pursues "pleasure," to recognize the legitimacy and seriousness of women's "vulnerability," to be cautious of regarding individual introspection as a shortcut to alleviate women's pressures; to encourage the creation of "realistic" ads that reflect the real challenges and demands of female workers, to encourage ads to tell broader stories of "ordinary" female workers, and to encourage brands and relevant government departments and social organizations to engage in sustained cooperation to build a more favorable advertising ecosystem for women's survival and development.

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