“The Big Women”: A textual analysis of Chinese viewers’ perception toward femvertising vlogs

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Abstract
Video blogging (vlogging), a type of short video that people produce by recording and editing their daily lives, has become an emerging form of digital cultural production on social media platforms in China. With the profound growth of video marketing on social platforms, brands have increasingly leveraged vloggers to promote female-targeted products. This phenomenon becomes especially paradoxical when marketers bring the narrative of female empowerment into the discourse. This case study employed textual analysis to understand how Chinese viewers make sense of Bobbi Brown’s “The Big Women” vlog endorsed by the female vlogger Zhuzi on Weibo. A typology of viewers’ response was generated: (1) reciprocity of self-disclosure; (2) perceived interconnectedness with the vlogger; and (3) perceived women empowerment and advertisement effectiveness. The findings of this article articulate a symbolic form of relationship between content creators, brands, and consumers that promotes women empowerment. This study argues, however, that this perception of women empowerment may obscure the implicit consumerism embedded in the femvertising contents, while promoting the myth of self-empowerment through consumption. The findings of the study shed light on the rise of (pseudo-)feminism ethos constructed by the consumer market in contemporary China and beyond.

Keywords
Consumer behavior, influencer marketing, vlog marketing, video blogs (vlogs), advertising effects, social media influencer, female empowerment advertising, femvertising

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The rise of social media influencers with celebrity status has driven influencer marketing to grow exponentially in the past few years (Lou & Yuan, 2019). As an emerging type of social media influencers, vloggers have gained commercial success through creating sponsored vlogs. Such practice is based on turning themselves into marketable self-commodities (Duffy & Hund, 2015). For example, by sharing makeup tutorials or reviews on fashion items with a stable online community, a fashion vlogger can craft her channel into an interface where fashion or cosmetic brands meet their potential consumers. Many studies have addressed the fashion blogging/vlogging sphere from various perspectives, such as perceived intimacies with influencers (Abidin, 2015), vloggers’ anxiety as emotional labor (Bishop, 2018), the influence of vloggers in China (Tang, 2019), and the impact of parasocial interactions with vlogger on brand evaluations (M. T. Liu et al., 2019). These studies have revealed that the relationship between vloggers and viewers is complex due to the intertwined and potentially conflicting nature of vlogs as being both a form of life archives and an emerging canvas for marketing communication.

So far, the majority of the works in microcelebrity studies tend to follow Anglo-centric legacies and mainly focus on mainstream social media platforms born in Silicon Valley (Abidin & Brown, 2018). Works that fall outside of this scope, for example, the phenomenon embedded in a local context of China, tend to be overlooked. The current study broadens the scope of studies on the intersection of vlogs, business, and gender on social media by focusing on the comment sphere around a famous Chinese vlogger, Zhuzi, who advocates female empowerment in her contents. Such contents become a form of femvertising (short for female empowerment advertising) when packaged in sponsored advertisements. Femvertising is the contemporary advertising practice that leverages feminist values to challenge traditional female stereotypes and promote brand awareness and purchase intention (Åkestam et al., 2017). It has been increasingly employed in social media influencer marketing. Despite the rapid growth of vlog marketing across the globe, studies that primarily focus on the phenomenon within the Chinese context are limited. Thus, the goal of this study is to redress the paucity of literature on the interactions of vlogs, business, and gender in the context of social media in China.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it interrogates (pseudo-)feminist key opinion leaders (KOLs) on social media who attempt to construct “autonomous modern” womanhood, a feminized ideal that negotiates conflicting gender discourses; it shows how consumers make sense of the neoliberal feminism ethos depicted in these branded posts. Second, it offers an understanding of to what extent consumers’ behaviors are influenced by the female-targeted brands that appropriate women empowerment discourse. More broadly, it offers an angle to understand the business ecosystem around vloggers on social media in contemporary China. Finally, it helps practitioners in the marketing industry, especially those who target women consumers, to understand their audience’s attitude toward women empowerment messages, taking note of whether their efforts truly empower or reinforce gender stereotypes.

**Literature review**

**Social media, consumerism, and gender power relations in the contemporary Chinese context**

The social media environment in China is active compared to other places in the world (Chiu et al., 2012). Consumption of new media has become an everyday reality for urban Chinese (Yu, 2007). Moreover, skeptical of messages from formal authority and institutions, Chinese users disproportionately trust opinion leaders in social networks (Chiu et al., 2012). Based on this mutual trust,
Chinese users are active consumers and producers (or “prosumers”) of new media contents, representing a symbolic value that taps into “a postmodern pattern of consumption-cum-production” (Yu, 2007, p. 428). More recently, facilitated by the easily accessible technology of digital video, the grassroots spirit has proliferated in a larger body of amateur blogging activities, which further altered how consumer culture operates in China (Yu, 2007).

Against the backdrop of current and historical sociocultural Chinese ideologies about fame, celebrity, beauty, feminism, and womanhood, a growing number of studies have advanced the field of study. Wang’s (2020) work shows, nowadays people are able to directly interact with microcelebrities who gradually gain status same as traditional celebrities. Indeed, the boundaries between the fame of celebrity and microcelebrity in the contemporary digital media system across the globe have become “more fluid and decentred” (Giles, 2002), thus allowing different relationships with the audience to emerge (p. 19). Likewise, in China, online celebrities/microcelebrities have also become a form of profitable profession, whose popularity is innately woven in the socio-technical contexts of contemporary China (G. Zhang & de Seta, 2018).

China witnessed the individualization of its society with the development of the reform-and-open-door policy, especially since the consumer market and mass media began to blossom in the late 1980s (Yan, 2009). This trend has also fed on femininity (F. Liu, 2014). The conventional discourse of women as “virtuous wife and good mother” and patriarchal-familial norms have been expanded and revised, as various forces such as consumer culture, media, and the state compete to redefine femininity (F. Liu, 2014). Reflecting this, multiple ideals of female identities such as the “busy professional,” the “strong woman,” and “nurturers” have been featured in advertisements (Hung et al., 2007).

There is also an emerging body of literature on the intersection between consumerism, individualism, and gender power relations in the Chinese Context. For example, Yang’s (2011) study on the discourse of two representations of women (i.e. nenu and shunu) found that gender has become a resource for developing consumer capitalist in the country. In addition, Xu and Feiner’s (2007) study investigated the promotion of Anglo-European beauty norms in China and argue that the promotion of beauty as a source of women’s economic success reinforces consumerism. Consumerism aims at “turning people into consumers and changing their consumer behaviours” (Peng, 2019, p. 3). The ideal image of Chinese women as “autonomous,” “modern” individuals depicted by Chinese neoliberal feminism is appealing to many women, who are eager for the self-expression of liberation (Liu, 2014; Peng, 2019; Rofel, 2007). With regard to how women negotiate neoliberal feminism and womanhood on social media, some scholars have paved the way for the study. For example, M. Zhang’s (2012) study found that a tall and thin body with fair skin is perceived as the ideal image by young women in the contemporary sociocultural context of China. This image has been internalized by young women in their everyday life, and has brought up seemingly contradictory feelings in Chinese young women: eager to earn the liberation of social status, yet still concerned about the demanding standards of beauty as portrayed in the media (M. Zhang, 2012).

Moreover, a growing body of literature focuses on (pseudo)feminist KOLs on Chinese social media. Specifically, Peng’s (2019) study examined the feminized male ideal constructed by pseudo-feminist Mi Meng in her WeChat account. It reflects a motive in Chinese neoliberal feminism agenda that provokes revival of patriarchal values (Peng, 2019). Likewise, SK-II’s global campaign Marriage Market Takeover which featured Chinese “leftover women” have come alongside controversies: the visual signs in the documentary somehow focused on the stereotypical traditions of women’s value—beauty, age, and gender roles, which reinforced gender stereotypes (Qiao &
Despite its efforts to promote a meaningful change in gender issues, the campaign actually reaffirms gender norms by rationalizing a neoliberal agenda that promotes consumption, self-care, and personal fulfillment (Wallis & Shen, 2018).

**Sponsored blogs and femvertising**

Characterized by their highly relatable and personalized reviews of products, social media influencers have become a prevalent marketing channel. As a result, multinational brands have been increasing their partnerships with social media influencers (Kantar, 2019). Sponsored vlogs have become an emerging form of marketing communication in China, especially for the brands in the “lifestyle” genre. These vlogs take a form of paid endorsements that combine advertising with editorials (Abidin, 2015), which are perceived to be relatable than traditional TV commercials (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Since most of the vlogs of the lifestyle genre target female viewers, embedding female empowerment messages in these videos is a natural choice for advertisers to gain brand awareness, especially from female consumers.

**Femvertising** is a term that combines *feminism* and *advertising*. It denotes the type of advertising in which brands strategically appropriate feminist values in order to promote products and/or generate brand awareness (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016; Lazar, 2006; Rodrigues, 2016). Before the label was specified, strategic communication campaigns have employed messages about women empowerment for almost a century (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016). More recently, many global brands have released commercials that encourage women to proudly challenge traditional stereotypes about women, and to be bold enough to pursue ambition and decisiveness—qualities that were traditionally perceived as masculine traits (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016).

A variety of studies in the advertising scholarship have examined the practices and effectiveness of utilizing women empowerment discourse to sell products to women. Based on a qualitative study using focus groups with undergraduate students in the United States, Abitbol and Sternadori (2016) found that femvertising messages successfully elicited consumers’ attention and that consumers’ general belief about the femvertising affected their perceptions of a company. Specifically, one study found that compared to traditional advertisements, femvertising has a positive impact on brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Drake, 2017). Moreover, many femvertising contents depict pressures facing cosmopolitan women and their struggles against stereotypes about women’s age and marriage, making it easy for women consumers to relate with (Drake, 2017). Such resonance is achieved by evoking consumers’ affective responses, which can potentially increase engagement, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions (Bülbül & Menon, 2010; Fennis & Stroebe, 2010). As noted by the World Federation of Advertisers (WFA; 2018), the practice of gaining resonance from women by pinpointing modern women’s struggles and “unstereotyping” gender portrayal not only has become an effective marketing tool but also serves social and policy purposes to drive marketing industry to evolve (p. 3).

However, some studies found that femvertising campaigns reinforce feminine traits, such as emphasizing appearance and constructing “the ideal androgynous woman: pretty, yet strong; decisive, yet gentle” (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016, p.117). As a result, femvertising messages often promote a superficial understanding of girl power, which always is reduced into a celebration of consumerism (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017). Moreover, despite female consumers are willing to spread the contents of femvertising on social media, this, however, does not necessarily implies purchase intention (Kapoor & Munjal, 2019). In sum, as an emerging form of marketing practice, femvertising comes along with seemingly contradictory effects in terms of changing consumers’
attitudes and further converting it to purchase intention. This study will explore the phenomenon in the Chinese context especially in the vlogging industry on social media.

**Prosumers of everyday life and perceived interconnectedness**

Many scholars have theorized the cultural production and consumption of everyday life in China in different contexts. These efforts include, for example, new media use and subjective social status embedded with the social stratification (Zhou, 2011), bond-building in social media communities (Cao et al., 2013), and how high cultural capital consumers in China distinguish themselves by displaying conspicuous taste (W. Zhang, 2020). These studies have illustrated how consumption, as part of the self-construction of the Chinese middle class, is shaped by social, political, economic, and cultural forces in postmodernity (Dholakia & Firat, 2003).

Such a postmodern perspective of consumption also characterized research on microcelebrities in Asia such as Abidin (2015). Drawing from Horton and Richard Wohl’s (1956) work on parasocial relationships, Abidin (2015) conducted an ethnographic study in Singapore’s influencer industry and terms the relational outcome between social media influencers and followers as “perceived interconnectedness,” which includes four aspects: commercial intimacies, interactive intimacies, reciprocal intimacies, and disclosive intimacies. Grounded in the blurring boundary between the conventional dichotomy of media producers and consumers, Abidin’s (2015) work is one of those pioneering efforts that theorized the relationships co-created by influencers and their followers (“prosumers”) on social media in the Asian context. For this reason, the current study builds on Abidin’s (2015) framework to theorize users’ perceptions about femvertising vlogs in the Chinese context.

Building on Abidin’s (2015) work, this study focuses on two aspects from the perspective of vlog viewers: *reciprocal intimacy* and *disclosive intimacy*. First, *reciprocal intimacy* denotes vlog viewers’ perception that their relationship with a vlogger is not hierarchical and has little social distance. Second, *disclosive intimacy* refers to viewers’ impression that a vlogger discloses her “true self” in her vlogs, or disclose her “behind-the-scene” personal life. However, this is not to say that the vlogger discloses her full or true self in the video. What is presented in the video may just be an illusion of intimate sharing. In Goffmanian terms, the audiences are “granted a temporary back stage status,” and “be allowed into the staging of another performance” (Ling, 1997, p.80). Indeed, a vlogger’s authentic “true self” perhaps is only known to him-or herself, which may or may not be the same as performed on the frontstage, such as in a sponsored vlog.

**Self-referencing, narrative persuasion, and self-disclosure in vlogs**

Vloggers’ constant disclosure of their mundane aspects of everyday life is also related to *self-referencing* in the field of consumer research. Self-referencing, a term used in cognitive psychology, denotes “the cognitive processes individuals use to understand incoming information that pertains to them by comparing it to self-relevant information stored in memory” (Escalas, 2007, p. 421). Studies have found the effectiveness of self-referencing in eliciting consumers’ positive emotional outcomes, thus positively affecting persuasion (Escalas, 2007). For example, self-referencing practice such as engaging consumers to actively generate a story for a painting, can help consumers to develop a coherent narrative, thus transforming consumption to a more satisfactory experience (West et al., 2004). Furthermore, narrative processing can influence consumers’ brand attitudes and behavioral intentions, and strengthen consumers’ self-brand connections (Escalas, 2004). In sum, compared to non-narrative ads, narrative ads are more effective in general (Kim et al., 2017).
Closely related to narrative persuasion, self-disclosure is one technique that microcelebrities use to build intimacy with their followers on social media (Abidin, 2015). As posited by Social Penetration Theory (SPT), one most widely used strategy during the initial stage of interpersonal communication is self-disclosure, which denotes “the voluntary sharing of personal history, preferences, attitudes, feelings, values, secrets, etc., with another person” (Griffin, 2006/2015, p. 97). As the name suggests, Social Penetration Theory argues that a person can draw closer to another person via voluntary sharing of personal stories, thus allowing the other person to “penetrate” from the surface to one’s inner world in order to facilitate relationship development.

As suggested by Social Penetration Theory, self-disclosure follows a law of reciprocity, which means that people disclose themselves in a reciprocal manner, and, at a rate similar to the other person, especially in early relational stages (Griffin, 2006/2015). This is true not only in face-to-face interpersonal communication, but also in the online settings (e.g. Lee, 2019). Likewise, a vlogger’s self-disclosure can also be viewed as a stimulus that evokes followers to self-disclose their own personal stories. As evidenced in a recent study, vlogs usually contribute to a sense of affinity through vloggers’ self-disclosure, which differentiates vlogs from other video genres (Ferchaud et al., 2018). To summarize, vlogging takes on the feeling of a diary as if the vloggers are revealing their true selves (Humphreys, 2018), which may encourage reciprocal self-disclosure among viewers.

By revealing the “true selves” and exchanging life stories this way, a perceived intimate relationship between a vlogger and followers is established. Marwick (2013) described this phenomenon as lifestreaming, a continuous process of showing personal lives to a networked audience, and is often used as a strategy for online identity management. Vloggers use this strategy to intentionally seek attention from their audiences and build their personal brands. Such exchanges between vloggers and followers also align with what Baym (2010) called “shared resources,” “support,” and “shared identities,” which are crucial to community-building (pp. 82–86). For example, a study has found that by disclosing her everyday life and giving tips on topics such as relationships, career choice, and time management, a female vlogger can strengthen relationships with viewers, thus fostering viewer’s identification with a girl who is “just like us” (García-Rapp, 2016, p. 16).

These efforts are also termed as “performative intimacy” (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 148). Marwick (2013) noted that microcelebrities are more willing to reveal intimate details of their thoughts and personal lives, sometimes even intentionally performing intimacy just to appeal to viewers. For example, sharing thoughts and even sad memories can create a stronger vlogger-viewer relationship (García-Rapp, 2016). However, this being “authentic” actually disguises the latent commercial interests. That is, entrepreneurial vloggers inevitably monetize their relationship with followers, in exchange for sponsorships from brands (Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Pruchniewska, 2018). To summarize, vloggers who promote women empowerment may deliberately perform self-disclosure in order to create a sense of intimacy with followers, which ultimately taps into commercial values.

Together, after synthesizing the literature on social media, femvertising, and microcelebrities’ self-disclosure, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1.** How do viewers respond to self-disclosure in the vlog discourse?

**RQ2.** How are viewers connected to the vlogger?
**RQ3.** How do viewers perceive women empowerment messages and the effectiveness of these advertisements?

**Method**

To address the research questions, this study uses textual analysis of viewers’ comments to uncover the latent meanings embedded in viewers’ perception of a femvertising vlog. Textual analysis is considered to include different research methods in communication and media studies, such as content analysis, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), multimodal analysis, and narrative analysis. The specific textual analysis described in this study by McKee (2003) is defined as a methodology to “understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live” (p. 8). According to McKee (2003), textual analysis allows researchers to “interpret texts (films, television programs, magazines, advertisements, clothes, graffiti, and so on) in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them” (p.8). Thus, for this study, textual analysis is suitable to investigate viewers’ narratives through their comments, aiming to understand how the viewers engage in sensemaking with the messages conveyed in femvertising vlogs.

**Sampling**

The samples of this study were collected from the Weibo comments of a vlog created by a female vlogger on Weibo, Zhuzi, a 31-year-old Chinese entrepreneurial vlogger who was selected as one of the “top V influencers” on Weibo in December 2018. As per writing this article (March 2020), Zhuzi has over 3.6 million followers on Weibo.

Weibo, the social media platform chosen for this study, is one of the most popular social media platforms in China, with monthly active users of 600 million as of June 2015 (China Internet Watch, 2015). In addition, highly engaged Weibo users have high intentions to co-create contents on Weibo, bringing a variety of social capital, personal values, and social roles to the platform, which further enables them to continue their participation (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). However, Weibo has its innate constraints, such as limiting comments to show in some public opinion discourse (Huang, 2019), and the ongoing debate about users’ privacy on the platform (Yuan et al., 2013).

The vlogger was selected primarily based on her commercially successful persona and engaged public in comment sections. The vlog chosen for this study was titled “The Big Women,” which was sponsored by the high-end cosmetics brand Bobbi Brown during the campaign “Never Let Others Define Your Beauty” initiated in April 2019. As a bilingual herself, Zhuzi narrated in both Chinese and English in the vlog, with subtitles of the two languages. The monologue was narrated by Zhuzi in Chinese, and her dialogues with two guests were in English as the video was shot in New York City. The comments were exported into a spreadsheet for analysis.

As obvious in the name, the campaign aimed to promote that women should define their own beauty and be confident enough to be the “big” woman: “confident, passionate and powerful.” In the sponsored vlog, vlogger Zhuzi interviewed two young women: Nona Catusanu, a cinematographer, and Mary Beth Barone, a stand-up comedian. They are both active in industries where women as top professionals are very rare. In the video, they discussed their attitudes toward stereotypes about women, disclosed their own career stories and their definitions of “beauty.” The narrative of the video formed an articulation that the three young women, including the vlogger Zhuzi herself,
are beautiful in the sense that they define themselves as “big women” who are brave enough and confident enough to act against stereotypes such as “women should not be bossy,” “being capable and beautiful are mutually exclusive,” and so on. They advocate that women should not be bounded by societal expectations; instead, they encourage women to “have confidence in your abilities,” “do not be afraid to try new things,” and “just don’t give up if you love it.” In the video, all of the three women use products from Bobbi Brown, emphasizing that the “extra touch” of the product makes them feel “so much powerful.”

The vlogger Zhuzi encouraged her followers to share the video on Weibo by having a chance to win giveaways sent by Bobbi Brown. At the point when the data were collected (April 2019), the video generated a total number of more than 3,300,000 viewership and 2975 comments since it was launched in April 2019.

Analysis

The textual analysis involved 2975 Weibo comments. The researcher extracted all the comments under the video for analysis, as they provide rich data to understand how the viewers perceive the femvertising vlog. All the comments were captured in April 2019 and were stored in a Google spreadsheet for analysis.

The study used a constant comparative approach for data analysis, which includes two stages (Tracy, 2012). First, in the primary-cycle coding stage, all the comments were entered into one column, to which a parallel column was created in order to document the thematic elements and short codes that emerged while the researcher read the material. The textual contents of each comment were noted line-by-line by the researcher, comparing each new line to the previous one. The sorting function in Google spreadsheet facilitated the comparison process. After the researcher read all the comments and developed a sense of the broad themes, codes such as “self-disclosure,” “role model,” and “stereotypes about women” emerged from the corpus.

In the phase of secondary-cycle coding, the researcher noted the themes that emerged from the first-level codes, which were further categorized into conceptual categories at a higher level of abstraction (Tracy, 2012). This process included two more rounds of rereading of the comments in the spreadsheet, regrouping the material and the relevant codes, and more readings of the femvertising literature to further explore the emerging themes, which were further refined inductively. In doing so, the researcher progressively sharpened the essence of themes that emerged and entered the phase of writing the narratives and analyzing the data with specific exemplars.

Results and discussion

The results emerged from the data demonstrated a spectrum of how the viewers make sense of the femvertising messages conveyed in “The Big Women” video. To answer the three research questions, in this section, I contextualize the typology of viewers’ reactions into three dimensions: (1) reciprocity of self-disclosure, (2) perceived interconnectedness with the vlogger, and (3) perceived women empowerment and advertising effectiveness. A diagram representing the typology can be found in Figure 1. The findings and corresponding examples are summarized in Table 1.

Reciprocity of self-disclosure: pouring of similar life stories

The video has generated a vast number of similar life stories disclosed by the viewers. The comment section becomes a place where people from different backgrounds share similar life stories of being a ‘big woman.’ For example, one viewer wrote her story:
I had a meeting with more than 10 people last week. I was the only non-English native speaker, the only female, the only Asian, the lowest position, and the youngest: all disadvantages are on me in terms of stereotypes. But I was the main speaker, and I am very proud of myself after the meeting.

In addition, some shared their personal “miserable” life stories, however “painful” and “embarrassing.” This voluntary sharing of personal story reflects the reciprocity of self-disclosure. That is, the video brought up the “brave” side of everyone—one trait that is highlighted in the “big women” video. They commented with their own similar life stories in a way either as a “reminder,” or as a “relief.” In this regard, the self-disclosure by the vlogger and the two women in the vlog resonated with the viewers, who, as a response, disclose similar experience that reflects their determination and courage when dealing with the glass ceiling women face in the workplace.
Perceived interconnectedness with the vlogger

The second dimension of viewers’ reaction to the femvertising vlog is perceived interconnectedness with the vlogger. Specifically, the comment section represents two types of attitudes toward the vlogger: (1) the feeling of being able to relate with the vlogger and (2) the perception that the vlogger serves as a “role model.” Examples were summarized as follow:

“I can totally relate to you.” Many viewers felt “inspired” by the big women attitudes in the video. Some feel more “energized” to do what they love, “to try new things,” and “just keep moving forward.” In addition, since many followers are loyal followers of the vlogger for years, they perceive the vlogger as someone whom they “grew up with,” “a big sister.” Taken together, these responses showed that the viewers perceive the vlogger as a relatable person, supporting and echoing the messages that she conveyed in the vlog.

“You’re an awesome role model.” Many viewers explicitly expressed that the vlogger Zhuzi is someone who they “always look up to” and even want to “become” someone like her. For example, one viewer said, “You’re exactly a big woman, role model of my life!!! Keep being BIG!!” Some viewers even consider her as a “role model” and a “mentor,” whom they can seek life advice from. They regard the vlogger as the ideal woman, who appears to be “confident, independent, powerful and successful.” These responses demonstrated that the vlogger’s advice, worldview, and attitude of life are popular with some viewers, and even may exert influence on these viewers’ life choices.

Perceived women empowerment and advertisement effectiveness

The third dimension to categorize the findings in this study is the viewers’ perception of women empowerment messages, and their evaluations of femvertising. The majority of the viewers demonstrated that they love the idea of the advertisement, which makes them feel “empowered.” Some viewers implied that such femvertising earns a positive reputation for Bobbi Brown and “brings positive influence on the society.” On the other hand, a small group of viewers doubted the motive and thought it was “too naive.” Examples are summarized as follow:

“This is empowering.” Many viewers mentioned how they feel “stronger,” “empowered,” and “energized” to become a “big woman” after watching the video. Some thanked the vlogger for “inspiring” and “motivating” them to “keep going.” That is, they feel that they are “not alone in this quest,” and they “fight” together against the stereotypes about women. Many viewers thanked Zhuzi for sharing “such an important topic,” and thought the messages in the video were “liberating,” which made her Weibo “more than just superficial beauty and style.” For example, one viewer praised the vlogger: “Empowered woman empowers women.” These responses showed that the viewers acknowledge the vlogger’s efforts in speaking up for women, and even “liberate” them from stereotypes, conventional values, and social norms that suppress women.

“Glad to see beauty brands that challenge societal norms.” Beyond the women empowerment message itself, some viewers expressed that they “love” the advertisement by Bobbi Brown and “love to see the spreading of this message.” For example, one viewer wrote: “this is the best sponsored video that I watched recently.” Similarly, another viewer also complemented: “if all the vloggers make sponsored videos like this, I will watch all of them! This is how high-quality sponsored videos
should be like.” Some viewers even translated their support of the vlog to purchase intention, announcing that Bobbi Brown products serve to showcase their identity as “the big women.” For example, one viewer even mentioned that after watching the video, she “really wanna buy Bobbi brown immediately.” This type of response shows the success of the sponsored vlog in terms of converting consumers’ support of the women empowerment ethos to brand awareness and even purchase intention.

“A win-win situation.” Some viewers think this form of collaboration between brands and content creators represents a template in today’s social media environment in China. For example, one viewer reflected on the microcelebrity endorsement phenomenon by depicting the relationship among brands, vloggers, and viewers:

Today there are still many people who don’t understand the phenomenon of bloggers accepting advertisements, and even think it is immoral. But in fact, this is just a new way of business model, in which content creators exchange their creativity for economic return. Commercialization is not in conflict with good contents. On the contrary, a good way of doing this is a win-win situation, where brands, bloggers and viewers all get what they want. Who doesn’t like contents like this?

Beyond the messages and the advertised brand, this interpretation highlights the business environment built around social media influencers. Indeed, the rise of social media influencers has attested to their role of providing an effective canvas for marketing communication in the overall ecosystem on Weibo.

“Too naive.” In contrast to the supportive attitudes above, a small group of viewers thought the idea of “the Big Women” was “too naive,” too “superficial.” This shows that disagreement exists in terms of viewers’ perception of the effectiveness of women empowerment message in the advertisement. It shows that some viewers are critical about the appropriation of the so-called women empowerment message in the sponsored vlog, which may overlook the structural oppression that women have to face every day.

So far, the article has presented the findings with exemplars selected from the sample. The following elaborates on and contextualizes the proposed typology.

First, the findings have shown that the femvertising vlog successfully motivated viewers of different backgrounds to disclose their fears and hopes to the vlogger in comments. Consistent with the interpersonal communication literature, this shows that self-disclosure follows a rule of reciprocity. That is, when viewers are exposed to a vlogger’s self-disclosure, they may also reveal their similar life experience to the vlogger as a response.

The second dimension of the typology is perceived interconnectedness between followers and social media influencers (Abidin, 2015). Perceived interconnectedness can be established through reciprocal self-disclosure. Consistent with Abidin’s (2015) study, the current study found two types of intimacies that viewers felt with a vlogger: reciprocal intimacy, that is, viewers’ perception that their relationship with a vlogger is not hierarchical; and disclosive intimacy, that is, viewers’ impression that a vlogger discloses her “true self” in her vlogs.

The third dimension is viewers’ attitudes toward “women empowerment” and its advertisement effectiveness. The findings demonstrated a spectrum of how viewers make sense of the stereotypes facing today’s young women in China and their coping strategies. Regarding stereotypes, many
viewers echoed the vlogger and explicitly expressed their desire to become the “big” woman, one who is “confident, passionate, and powerful” to challenge patriarchy and celebrate her independence.

Women empowerment is the core value that femvertising campaigns aim to convey, but the ultimate goal is to transform consumers’ resonance to brand awareness and purchase intentions. Such latent marketing intents are encoded in the nature of femvertising. Regarding this, patterns that emerged from the findings underscored three different opinions: first, such a campaign empowers women and offers a positive influence on the society. Some viewers even wrote that they will buy the advertised Bobbi Brown products. For these viewers, they believe the video offered a positive vibe that challenges stereotypes about women, thus should be given credit for. This is a comparatively straightforward way of understanding the video, and reflects the stereotypes to some degree. For example, the comments from single women who felt “inspired” and “empowered” by the video do imply the existence of the stereotypes about women. These viewers showed support toward “the Big Women” video, and they generously gave credits to the advertised brand that spoke for them to challenge social norms.

The second category of viewers’ opinion, on the contrary, is that such a campaign does not empower women. As obvious in some viewers’ comments, the video is not “deep” enough, and looks “superficial” when depicting the lives of modern women. Although the core message conveyed in the video is “the Big Women,” the narrative in the video somehow equals this type of women to the “ideal” women, an idea that some female viewers refused to agree with. “Empowering” women to be “bold” and “independent” is a strategy used in marketing campaigns that target modern women who constantly feel the contradiction between self-actualization and societal expectation of having a “stable” life. However, such “women empowerment” messages actually reinforce, rather than lessening, stereotypes about women. Indeed, “empowering” women to be “independent” and “bold” enough to “live at one’s own pace” is based on the assumption, if not an illusion, that there is an “ideal” life, and there is an “ideal” woman. As McQuail (2010) suggested, “messages directed at women either liberate them from or perpetuate gender stereotypes” (as cited in Tandoc & Ferrucci, 2014, p. 36). Advocating the notion of “the ideal woman” does challenge the stereotypes rooted from patriarchal value systems, but at the same time, it establishes a new one: only by achieving financial independence, a successful career, and a stable relationship/marriage, can a woman be regarded as a “role model.” As obvious in the findings, after watching the video, many viewers hope to someday become as “confident, beautiful and successful” as the vlogger Zhuzi, who is a successful entrepreneurial vlogger on Weibo and has a happy marriage as portrayed in her vlogs. Acknowledging that there is an ideal woman is still a stereotype. “The Big Women” video demonstrated how stereotypes about women ironically intersect with the implicit selling of “the ideal woman.”

To contemplate deeper, femvertising promotes, at least on the surface level, the equal rights of women and men in their social lives. That being said, femvertising, however, is not by its nature free from creating new stereotypes about women. For example, by promoting an “ideal” image of a successful woman who enjoys both a stable marriage and a successful career which ensures financial independence, a new stereotype is created by looking down upon those women who voluntarily choose to be a full-time wife/mother at the biological peak of their lives, making them feel “guilty for not being fulfilled” (Wood, 2008, p. 323). In sum, when providing ideology of “the ideal woman” who challenges the existing stereotypes, brands run the risk of creating a new one, one that is implicitly signaling and serving the purpose of consumerism. That is, by advocating
“women’s free choice,” the implicit messages embedded in the femvertising actually obscure the promotion of consumerism culture, in which much capital is required to invest in appearance and cosmetics that make the socially mediated “having-it-all” and “free choice” seem tangible (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015). In this sense, the “women empowerment” message serves as a mask that disguises consumerism. In the case of the vlog in this study, the notion of femininity is characterized by a Western-style consumerism which equals women’s “empowerment” with consumption (Thornham & Pengpeng, 2010). Consumption in itself is not a problem, what is worth cautioning here is consumerism, and the idea that a woman should buy specific products in order to be perceived as “successful” and “ideal.”

For centuries, women have been taught what to do and what are the virtues that comply with social norms and expectations. Now it is worth contemplating whether we really want to continue reproducing and amplifying these messages. As in the case of this study, the phenomenon is situated in the intersection of vlogs, business, and gender in the context of social media. Perhaps, we do need role models that empower women on social media. Yet, what is worth questioning is the extra layer of “what to buy” in order to be qualified as a “big woman” or “ideal” life. In other words, perhaps by acknowledging that the “ideal” denotes different things for each individual, we may be able to come to a place where we embrace, rather than obscure the specific subject position, be it a busy professional or a full-time wife. They are all “big women,” one way or another.

From the perspective of the vlogger, Zhuzi creates contents to sustain the perceived interconnectedness that she has established with her followers. Yet, her entrepreneurial nature inevitably monetizes her keen knowledge about establishing an image as the “ideal woman,” which taps on followers’ life aspirations. On the surface, beauty and fashion vloggers seem to have the power to sustain or even break the stereotypical belief systems that the society has toward young women. However, inherent in their genes as entrepreneurs, the vloggers only do so in a way that aligns with their commercial interests. Some viewers have already found a way to reconcile this hybrid of creative contents and commercial interests. As obvious in one comment, one viewer wrote that “Zhuzi represents a good example of how vloggers should create videos if they have to accept sponsorships.” Indeed, this represents a symbolic relationship among the three agents: content creators, consumers, and brands. It also depicts the business culture and the vlogging industry in the digital age in China.

To summarize, the above section has illustrated the findings of the study with exemplars and interpretations. It categorized how the viewers in this case study make sense of the femvertising messages into three dimensions: reciprocity of self-disclosure, perceived interconnectedness with the vlogger, and perceived women empowerment and advertising effectiveness. In the following section, I discuss and consolidate the findings of this study with respect to the general scholarship of the topic and beyond.

Discussion

With regard to the literature, three aspects of theoretical accounts can be generated from the findings: (1) microcelebrities’ relationship building with followers on social media, (2) the promotion of consumption as a way for women to realize self-actualization, and (3) the appropriation of “authentic feminism” for (pseudo-)feminism ethos constructed by the consumer market.

First, consistent with the literature, the study found two types of intimacies that viewers felt with a vlogger: reciprocal intimacy and disclosive intimacy. This interconnectedness is developed
through the reciprocity of self-disclosure between the vlogger and her followers. To offer a more thorough theoretical account, such relationship-building efforts exist not only in the realm of interpersonal communication but also in the social media environment where microcelebrities connect with their followers. In other words, the perceived interconnectedness felt by the followers demonstrates the role of self-disclosure in building relationship between microcelebrities on social media and their followers. This is consistent with the law of reciprocity as suggested by Social Penetration Theory. However, it is necessary to note that the relationships developed between the vlogger and her followers cannot be strictly considered as interpersonal since some followers may only read or watch the content but never interact with the vlogger by commenting or forwarding, yet they still may somehow develop perceived interconnectedness with the vlogger. Therefore, the vlogger-viewer relationship could be dyadic yet asymmetrical (O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018).

Second, the findings of this study also attested to the fantasizing of consumption as a way to achieve “empowerment, self-actualization and individualization,” an agenda constructed by microcelebrities on social media who implicitly call among their followers for an “investment in their appearance” as a way of realizing self-empowerment (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017, p. 385). These efforts align with what previous scholars have referred to as the feminism approach of “Sex and the City” (Arthurs, 2003), which denotes the marketing approach that legitimizes consumption of goods and equates consumption with individual empowerment.

Third, the findings in the current study are consistent with what previous scholarships, from both the West and China, have identified as the appropriation of an “authentic feminism” discourse embedded in (pseudo-)feminist KOLs’ self-branding practices. Despite their efforts to promote a positive social change, encouraging women to pursue a felicitous work–family balance paradoxically denies the structurally oppressed position facing young women in China (F. Liu, 2014; Peng, 2019; Rottenberg, 2014; Wallis & Shen, 2018). Arguably, (pseudo-)feminist vloggers hold a “feminist” lens to portray women’s position, with attempts to place their self-expression as part of greater changes in social activism. Yet, feminist ideals were rendered politically superficial by the commercial intents encoded in these vlogs (Taylor et al., 2016). As shown in the findings, the (pseudo-)feminist vlog has stimulated contradictory feelings among the audiences: disliking the superficial tone while feeling socially validated by the “big women” ideal as portrayed in the vlog.

While it remains largely debatable whether sponsored vlogs can serve as potential vehicles for feminist change on a broader scale, unpacking the convergence of these mixed feelings does help clarify the fact that women who respond positively to these (pseudo-)feminist massages are inclined to make political sense of their personal obstacles, keep interrogating gender norms and oppression (Taylor et al., 2016; White, 2018). In other words, despite their inherent tensions, these vlogs provide women an online space for “public engagement in thinking out loud, honing a voice, self-naming, community-building, and stake-holding” (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011, p. 1770). In sum, femvertising vlogs allow people to share critiques and disentangle the paradox of feminist thought and commercial motives, thus making it possible to go beyond the superficial discussion of what is an ideal “big woman,” approaching the core of how to negotiate the issue of their everyday lived experience through the continuous process of naming, refusing, refining, and remaking. Inevitably, this is a dialogical process that must be continually negotiated. Indeed, it is the presence of such dialogues, rather than a lack thereof, that advances China’s feminist thought and movement adherents in this political juncture.
Conclusion

After reviewing the context to the study and the country, this study broadens the scope of studies on social media influencers by focusing on the vlogging sphere around a famous Chinese female vlogger. It mapped followers’ response to female empowerment messages according to three dimensions: (1) reciprocity of self-disclosure; (2) perceived interconnectedness with the vlogger; and (3) perceived women empowerment and advertisement effectiveness. The femvertising vlog chosen for this study is a symbol of how vlog marketing, the celebration of individualization, and (un)stereotyping “the ideal woman” intertwined against the backdrop of today’s digital culture production in China.

This study is not without limitations. For example, the vlogger chosen for this study disclosed the sponsorship in both her video and textual contents. However, since the vlog marketing industry of China is still in its infancy, not all influencers voluntarily disclose their sponsorships due to a lack of regulating policy on sponsored contents. Brands and influencers may take advantage of this by not disclosing sponsorship in order to make the contents seem more authentic. Disclosing or not disclosing sponsorships may shape viewers’ perception of the contents in different ways, which fosters future research.

Despite the limitation, this study aims to construct a more nuanced understanding of viewers’ perception of femvertising vlogs by proposing a typology. First, many viewers felt perceived interconnectedness with the influencer, leaving comments with self-disclosure that resonates with the narrative in the video. Second, viewers hold conflicting perceptions of the women empowerment messages and the latent commercial orientations. In one regard, viewers were supportive of the brand that advocates “women empowerment,” which motivates them to purchase products of the advertised brand. Yet, some viewers were suspicious of the femvertising motives. Some even criticized the messages as being superficial or encouraging consumerism. In sum, though femvertising is still debatable in terms of its effectiveness to promote gender equality, the content of the video itself did successfully elicit viewers’ attention and generate hot discussions around the topic of women empowerment message itself and the advertised brand.

The current study hopes to contribute to scholarship by providing a timely assessment of the interplay of vlogs, business, and gender in the context of social media in China. First, theoretically, the study extended the concept of perceived interconnectedness in the vlog context in China. This effort advances the understanding of the relationship building between vloggers and their followers, and how this relationship might further influence followers’ perceptions about the vlogger, the women empowerment narratives, and the advertised brand.

Second, to the best knowledge of the researcher, this study is among the first to examine the femvertising vloggers in the context of social media in China. Vloggers as emerging social media influencers have gained much attention, yet limited scholarships examined what influence they may exert on followers, especially with the women empowerment discourse constructed by the consumer market. It offered a thorough understanding of their impact on consumer’s perception formation. As obvious in the findings, the rise of femvertising vloggers may recast people’s perceptions of feminism, diverting women’s attention away from the dilemma embedded in the gendered socio-economic structure of Chinese society to pseudo-feminism and consumerism values (Peng, 2019). Yet, such femvertising vlogs stimulated food for thought in terms of disentangling the contradictions between feminism and commercial profiteering. More importantly, these vlogs enable critics through a dialogical process that must be continually unfolding, in and through which China’s feminist thought and movement proceed under the wider societal climate.
Third, for practitioners in the advertising industry, the study offered a facet to understand Chinese consumers’ perceptions about brands that leverage gender narratives. Their mixed attitudes toward the advertisement in this study imply that brands and marketers should exercise extreme caution when implementing women-targeted messages, taking notes on whether the message truly liberates women from or perpetuates gender stereotypes.

This study constitutes the first of many sequential steps toward understanding (1) the mechanism of relationship building between influencers and followers on social media; (2) how this relationship affects users’ brand attitudes and product interests; and (3) how the rise of (pseudo-) feminist influencers on social media contribute to gender debates in China. Future research may use qualitative in-depth interviews and quantitative approach such as survey and experiment to understand the psychological mechanism that underpins these relationships.

Acknowledgements

I thank Dr. Chen Lou who generously inspired the topic of this paper. I thank Dr. Edson C. Tandoc Jr. for introducing the intrinsic charm of qualitative research. I am indebted to the Editor-in-chief, Dr. Anthony Fung, Editors, and the anonymous reviewers of Global Media and China for their extremely helpful comments and suggestions on the manuscript. All errors are my own.

Funding

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

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