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Fashion Sense: Chinese Women'S Response to Feminine Appeals in Transnational Advertising

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With changing social expectations, living standards, and global influences, Chinese women have developed an awareness of their femininity marked by consumption. We explore how women respond to female appeals in fashion ads in China, finding that they respond differently than American women do to the same type of appeals.

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Fashion Sense: Chinese Women's Response to Feminine Appeals in Transnational Advertising

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Women are, in large part, responsible for the growth in retail sales in China (Rein 2009) and are becoming much more fashion conscious in this dawning consumer culture (China in Focus 1995). According to Rein (2009), Chinese women are spending as much as men on luxury consumption, accounting for 50% of luxury purchases from companies like Louis Vuitton and Gucci. Additionally, Chinese women are becoming much more focused on buying clothing and beauty products and are becoming much more concerned with looking good and looking fashionable.

As such, international fashion magazines and advertising agencies have entered into the Chinese market, helping to usher in a new fashion culture within the country. Much of the images portrayed in these media are simply adapted from Western sources, involving the modification of title, imagery, or copy in advertisements used in different cultures (Buzzell 1968; Reichal 1989; Ricks et al. 1974). Such modification ranges from a nearly complete transformation of an existing ad involving all three aspects or simply translating the copy language that appears in the ads. However, the Western advertisements in fashion magazines often do not change the model for their counterparts in China, leaving many idealized and European-looking (i.e. blonde, and blue-eyed) women in these ads.

As such, a few studies are beginning to look at the impact of fashion advertising on women and women's assessment of that advertising. For instance, Hung, Li, and Belk (2005; 2007) examined images of women in Chinese magazine advertising and developed a typology of the modern woman as portrayed in that advertising, and also examined the response strategies women used to interpret those images. Their study focused on the target audiences for those ads, essentially recruiting women who came of age well after the advent of the open-door policy. We seek to advance their study, examining the responses for feminine appeals in advertising for both the target audience as well as that target audiences' mothers, women who came of age before the open door policy when advertising was still viewed as a suspect aspect of capitalism.

Scholars such as Hirschman and Thompson (1997) and Hung et al. (2006) have conducted research on consumers' response to media images. Hirschman and Thompson (1997) identified three self-referencing responses that consumers employed to describe their relationship with media icons: aspiring/inspiring, deconstructing/rejecting, and identifying/individualizing, which were adapted by Hung et al. (2007). According to Hirschman and Thompson (1997), inspiring and aspiring occurs when a media image is interpreted as representing an ideal self to which the consumer can aspire. Media icons are read as inspirational goals or ideals that the consumer chooses to work towards. In this motivational relationship, many potential sources of disbelief are suspended. Rejecting/deconstructing occurs when the consumer's relationship with the mass media is expressed through overt criticism of the artificial and unrealistic quality of the media representation. Identifying/individualizing describes distinct ways by which consumers negotiate their self-perceptions and personal goals in relation to the idealized images presented in the mass media.

Little is known about how women from a different culture respond to similar advertising within the global marketplace. As such, the purpose of the following paper is to examine the response that

Chinese and American women have for such ads found in the pages of their fashion magazines and the inter-generational differences that occur with these responses. To do so, we took a focus group interview approach to address the research purpose. Focus groups are a useful method for gathering ideas and insights for a variety of purposes such as obtaining consumer impressions of advertising copy (Iacobucci and Churchill 2005) or determining the impact of gender on the consumption of advertising (Hogg and Garrow 2003).

Given the purpose of our research concerns how different generations of women in a different culture respond to the feminine appeals in ads, we conducted a variety of dyadic focus group interviews where mother (age between 45 to 60) and daughter (age between 21 to 34) were shown advertising images taken from fashion magazines in both the U.S. and China. Based upon previous research (Chang 2004), the magazines we chose for the study share primary target audiences and are consistent in each country with each ranging between the ages of 21 and 35 (Cosmopolitan 2011; Elle 2011). The participants were recruited through a regional Chinese University and a regional American university of approximately the same size (between 11,000 and 13,000 students).

The results demonstrate that both generational and cross-cultural differences exist in terms of the interpretative strategies that were applied by these consumers. For instance, our American informants very much liked the nurturer appeal present in the advertisements with the U.S. daughters tending to associate the nurturer type with their families and/or mothers and the U.S. mothers identifying with the images in the ads. Conversely, both the Chinese daughters and their mothers rejected the ads outright, claiming that they did not represent their idea of the Chinese nurturer type. In addition, both the American mothers and daughters rejected the professional appeal in these ads, viewing them as fake and unrealistic. On the other hand, Chinese mothers and daughters both appreciated the ad with the daughters often aspiring to be like the image in the ad or, at the very least, aspiring to the professional role in which the image made the most sense.

Our study extended Hirschman and Thompson (1997)'s findings. Women not only can compare the self with the media images but also seeking solutions (e.g., comparing the media icon with friends, relatives, and even strangers). In addition, culture plays a significant element to shape how female consumers perceived the femininity in ads. Finally, there appears to be an authenticity gap in relation to the advertisements. Chinese women saw the nurturer in the ads as inauthentic whereas American women viewed the professional women as inauthentic. This authenticity gap is, of course, culturally bound; however, it also indicates the degree to which femininity and feminine appeals may not be universal in regards to fashion and consumption.

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