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# Femvertising as a resource of meaning-making and identity negotiation – A consumer cultural perspective

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# Abstract

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## **Femvertising as a resource of meaning-making and identity negotiation – A consumer cultural perspective**

There is a tendency for organizations to draw on social and political issues to make brands relevant to consumers, among which the appropriation of women empowerment discourse has attracted considerable attention because of its success in practice. Given the paucity of studies both in strategic communication to evaluate consumers' responses to organizations' communication strategies and in advertising studies to examine the emerging form of advertising to empower women, this study focuses on femvertising from consumers' perspective. Taking the "leftover women" discourse in SK-II's "Marriage Market Takeover" commercial as an entry point, this study uses consumer cultural theory to explore the ways in which Chinese female consumers attach personalized meanings to femvertising and use femvertising to address the conflicts between their personal identity and social identity as "leftover women" in Chinese society. Verbatim texts of 21 narrative interviews were analyzed through interpretative narrative analysis with specific emphasis given to conflicts in the respondents' narratives. The findings of this study reveal that Chinese female consumers tend to adopt extensive and intensified postfeminist notions to interpret femvertising. Consumers' critical readings of the commercial also suggest their preferences among countervailing cultural meanings, which reflect their identity negotiation process. The implications for future research on femvertising studies are discussed.

Keyword: Femvertising, Advertising, Cultural branding, Postfeminism, Gender Stereotypes, Consumer culture theory, Meaning-making, Identity construction

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

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This chapter consists of four sections. The first section focuses on the relevance and rationale of the current study. It is followed by the introductions of research questions and research purposes. The final section presents the structure of the thesis.

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## 1.1. The rise of femvertising

What does the age of 25 mean to you? For unmarried Chinese women, the age of 25 means that they are labeled as “leftover women.” Once a female is labeled as “leftover,” she is devalued in the marriage market regardless of her appearance, personality, career, or lifestyle. Negative comments on leftover women are everywhere, including official discourses, mass media, and even people’s daily conversations. The stigmatization of “leftover women” is a typical example of the increasing institutional forces that pressure Chinese women to “return home” in recent years, namely to sacrifice their career and go back home to serve husbands and children (Song, 2016). In the meanwhile, recent years have also seen a rise of women empowerment discourse in Chinese society as there are increasing voices encouraging women to be independent and pursue career success. Chinese women’s negotiation between family responsibilities and labor expectations has run through the twentieth century (Lu, 2004). The conflict between women’s childbearing responsibilities and labor expectations creates a niche market for many global and national brands. Branding strategies formulate “return home” discourse as a crisis women struggle with, which can be addressed by consuming the brands.

Such appropriation of feminist notions in organizations’ communication strategy is not unique. As Banet-Weiser (2012) points out, in the contemporary brand landscape, a brand’s value has exceeded its tangible product to cover people’s social and cultural relations. In order to make individual consumers identify with brands, brands tend to attach social and cultural meanings to their commodities (Banet-Weiser, 2012). For example, in the case, introduced above, brands attach feminist meanings to their products. In other cases, cultural meanings such as environmentalism or racial equality are also adopted by organizations as their selling points. Brands’ strategy to integrate cultural meanings is known as “cultural branding” (Holt, 2004), which refers to a type of communication strategies to commodify social and political life to

make it sellable and consumable (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In this sense, people's political position can be declared, verified, and reinforced by their consumption behaviors. Such cultural branding process, in turn, transforms brands into a cultural context, in which individuals construct their narratives of the self, negotiate identities, and establish emotional relationships (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In general, through employing pro-women messages as their communication strategies, organizations establish a simultaneous connection between political ideologies, merchandising and consumer-citizens.

Feminism is currently one of the most frequently used resources to brand goods and services in international and especially the Chinese market. The prevalence of feminism has even earned it a term "femvertising" to denote advertising embedded with female empowerment discourse. Using women empowerment discourse in their communication strategy enables organizations to highlight women's crisis of confidence, which should be addressed by adopting organizations' solution that combines women's power to consume and their body positivity, self-love, and self-esteem (Banet-Weiser, 2018). One typical example that marks the emergence of femvertising in the Chinese market is SK-II's "Marriage Market Takeover" commercial in 2016. As a Japanese skincare brand, SK-II published a commercial concerning "leftover women" issue on a Chinese video website and their official social media account, which attracted millions of views, likes, and comments.

Despite the practical data that shows the power of femvertising, however, academics have yet to explore this burgeoning advertising form. The lack of research is understandable, considering that femvertising is a newly emerging form of advertising which practitioners have just tapped into. However, it also provides great potential for exploration for researchers. In this sense, this study can complement the paucity of literature in this field.

Secondly, femvertising is a form of strategic communication as it fits the definition of strategic communication as a deliberate and purposive communication practice of organizations to achieve its goal and objectives (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013). The behavioral outcome is a less explored area within strategic communication studies (Zerfass & Holtzhausen, 2014). Given its essential role in navigating and evaluating communication strategies, it is thus urgent to investigate and conceptualize consumers' perceptions and responses in terms of communication conducted by organizations, which lead to their behavioral outcomes. This study could bridge this gap by providing a consumers' perspective of femvertising, specifically

by examining how Chinese female consumers understand and appropriation the women empowerment discourse in advertising.

Thirdly, since femvertising is a form of advertising that uses gender roles as its primary selling point, it is necessary to refer it to gender roles in advertising studies. A review of recent studies on gender roles in four primary advertising journals shows a scarcity of qualitative studies in this area as most research takes quantitative approaches to study consumers' response to gender role in advertising (Zotos & Grau, 2016). Given that qualitative methods have its strength on deeply excavating research objects' inner world, this study will take a qualitative approach to study femvertising from consumers' perspective, which can supplement previous research on advertising and gender roles.

Moreover, studies on femvertising have close relations with postfeminist theory because the discourses employed by femvertising that consumption brings power, and women should empower themselves are a form of postfeminist discourse (Gill, 2008). Although it is recognized that the surveillance of popular culture on women not only regulates women's appearance but has also permeated into women's psychic life, women's psychic life is a scarcely covered area within postfeminist studies (Gill, 2017). Also, because of its roots in Western culture, most of the previous studies on postfeminism focus mainly on western countries. Since postfeminism has become a global concept with the process of globalization, it is necessary to study postfeminism in a non-Western context. Since this study focuses on femvertising in the Chinese market, it can add knowledge of women's psychic life and postfeminism in a non-Western country to postfeminist studies.

## **1.2. Research aim and questions**

This study aims to conceptualize femvertising from a consumer cultural point of view by examining how Chinese female consumers attach meanings to femvertising and use it as a resource to solve identity conflicts between the society's label as a "leftover women" and their personal identity.

The interest of this study lies in the tendency of brands to embed post-feminist empowerment discourse in their communication strategies. To be more specific, this study particularly focuses on the "leftover women" discourse in femvertising in China. It does so by conducting a case study of SK-II's "marriage market takeover" commercial.



This study addresses the aim through the following research questions:

1. How do Chinese female consumers interpret “leftover women” discourse in femvertising?
2. How do Chinese female consumers use femvertising as a resource to negotiate their identity as “leftover women” in Chinese society?

By asking the above research questions, Chinese female consumers are regarded as active agents who give meaning to femvertising, rather than act as passive receivers of female empowerment messages. Indeed, consumers are the final arbitrators of the meanings of advertising as they use advertising as a principal recourse to make sense of themselves and their surroundings (Mick & Buhl, 1992). In addition, since femvertising is a form of advertising that contains social and cultural meanings, efforts should also be devoted to understanding the Chinese sociocultural context to achieve comprehensive answers to the research questions. Given the strengths of consumer culture theories on understanding consumers in a specific cultural context, consumer cultural theories are used as the foundational theories for this study.

### **1.3. Delimitation and focus: the “leftover women” discourse**

This study takes “leftover women” discourse in advertising as an entry point to study consumers’ interpretation and appropriation of femvertising. There are three reasons behind it.

In the first place, “leftover women’s” consumption ability made them the target audience of femvertising. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) pointed out, brands only celebrate the power of women with economic and cultural privilege because these group of women usually have great consumption ability. Chinese women are powerful consumers with high income and the abilities to make free consumption choice. This is evidenced by the fact that Chinese women contribute 41% of the national GDP in 2014 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015) and that China ranked first in the list of female labor forces participation rate in 2013 among countries in Asia and the Pacific area (Asian Development Bank, 2017). Moreover, “leftover women” are usually urban women with high education level and well-paid jobs (Fincher, 2014), which provide them with economic and cultural privilege and turn them into the perfect audience of femvertising.

Secondly, “leftover women” belong to the first and second generations after Chinese education popularization and economic reform. Their growth environment and life experience

are distinguished from earlier generations'. Although studies on earlier generations can provide insights of the contemporary Chinese market to some extent, studying the "leftover women" group can provide findings with more reference values for understanding the present and future female consumers in the Chinese market.

Finally, "leftover women" is already a widely discussed topic on all levels of social life in China. After the success of SK-II's "leftover women" commercial in 2016, more brands have also published femvertising to target "leftover women," which not only provides ample empirical material for study but also manifests a significant conflict between conflicting discourses in the society. On the one hand, increasing voices in society are urging Chinese women to take more family responsibilities. The emergence of the stigmatization of "leftover women" is an example of such discourse. On the other hand, more and more brands have started to deliver pro-female messages that encourage women to struggle with social pressure and choose their ways of life. This is best exemplified by SK-II's commercial that shows "leftover women's" resistance of marriage pressure.

Given the significance of "leftover women" in the Chinese market and the dilemma they are facing, it is, therefore, relevant to focus on "leftover women" discourse in femvertising as an example of cultural branding in China. However, it is worth noting that the use of the term "leftover women" in this study does not mean to stigmatize or offend Chinese women. Instead, I regarded the emergence of the term as having a constructed social meaning and being a representative of social regulations on women. The purpose of using this term is to understand how the constructed "leftover women" image is presented in femvertising and how Chinese women perceive the way femvertising (re)constructs the image.

#### **1.4. Disposition**

This thesis is divided into five sections. The remainder of the thesis departs from a review of previous literature on four main areas: femvertising, strategic communication, gender roles in advertising, and postfeminism. Different perspectives in these areas and the gaps this study seeks to fulfill will be introduced. The third chapter is devoted to consumer culture theories that will be used in the analysis to understand female consumers' interpretation and identity negotiation process in the face of femvertising. Based on the theoretical foundation, epistemology and research methods employed by this study are introduced to give a

comprehensive view of the research design. After that, the findings and analysis will be presented by referring to the collected data, which is followed by the discussion chapter to further discuss some important points in the findings. The final chapter will summarize the study and presents suggestions for future research.

# Chapter 2 Literature Review

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This chapter gives a brief introduction of existing literature that is related to femvertising. The first part of this chapter focuses on relations between femvertising and strategic communication, which is followed by an introduction of limited studies that have conducted on femvertising. The third part introduces previous advertising studies on gender roles because femvertising is a new way of portraying gender roles in advertising. Given that femvertising is interrelated at a great level with feminist studies, the final part is devoted to studies in feminist studies, particular to postfeminism.

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Femvertising is essentially a form of strategic communication that is embedded with female empower discourse. The success femvertising achieved in practice and its new way to portray gender roles has interested many scholars, but not many studies have been conducted on femvertising as it is a newly emerging advertising category. Although femvertising is a new area in advertising studies, gender roles in advertising is a topic that has long been studied by many scholars. Beyond the advertising field, scholars have also studied femvertising from a feminist perspective, particularly regarding femvertising as a form of postfeminist discourse. The following part will introduce related studies in strategic communication, femvertising, gender roles in advertising, and postfeminism more fully.

## **2.1. Femvertising and strategic communication**

Strategic communication draws from four principal scholarship clusters, one of which is marketing, advertising, and public relations (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007). Although strategic communication has extended to embrace broader communication forms, advertising is still a pillar in this area (Hallahan et al., 2007). Femvertising is an umbrella term used to denote advertising that uses female empowerment discourse as a selling point. In this sense, femvertising, in essence, is an organization's deliberate and purposive communication practice to achieve its goal and objectives. This understanding of femvertising makes is in line with the definition of strategic communication as "the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals" (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013).

Compared to the extreme focus on organizations and strategies, the behavioral outcome is an area that has long been neglected by scholars in strategic communication studies (Zerfass & Holtzhausen, 2014). One example used by Zerfass and Holtzhausen to support their argument of the absence of behavioral outcome studies is advertisers' struggle of how to effectively measure the contribution of advertising to the overall marketing outcomes. The insufficiency of studies on the outcome evaluation in strategic communication is incommensurate to its essential role in navigating, shaping, and evaluating organizations' communication. This study can address this gap by providing a consumers' perspective of femvertising, which can be used to evaluate the effect of organizations' communication strategy.

## **2.2. Femvertising as a newly emerging advertising category**

The term femvertising was first defined by a digital media company SHE Media in 2014 (SHE Media, n.d.). Scholars then adopted it as a generic term for female empowerment advertising (e.g., Åkestam et al., 2017). According to this definition, femvertising is a form of advertising that presents women's role in an empowering way.

As a new advertising category, limited studies have been done on femvertising. Among the few studies looking at femvertising, research topic varies from the depiction of women to the empowerment discourse, and to the audience's acceptance. The portrayal of women in femvertising can be found in Gill's (2008) study, in which she summarized three forms of women's roles in femvertising as "the young, heterosexually desiring 'midriff', the vengeful women set on punishing her partner or ex-partner for his transgressions, and the 'hot lesbian', almost always entwined with her beautiful Other or double" (Gill, 2008).

When it comes to the empowerment discourse in femvertising, in their analysis of Dove's Real Beauty Campaign, Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) regard Dove's women empowerment advertising as a postfeminist discourse that connects women's self-esteem with consumption (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). They understand Dove's Real Beauty Campaign as a kind of "commodity activism" which, on the one hand, allows corporations to profit from social justice, on the other hand, provide possibilities to change social reality by unifying critical subjectivities (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Another focus of femvertising is its effect. Taking a comparative approach to study the impact of femvertising and traditional advertising, Åkestam and his colleagues (2017) shed light on the advantage of femvertising on enhancing the female audience's brand attitudes. By focusing on company-cause fit, Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) study indicates a connection between the company-cause fit and consumers' attitude and purchase intention after watching femvertising.

Reviews of the few studies on femvertising show the relevance between femvertising and other two academic areas: gender roles in advertising studies and postfeminist studies. Hence, the following two sections will dig deeper into these two areas to provide a comprehensive and thorough understanding of femvertising.

### **2.3. Femvertising as a new way to present gender roles in advertising**

The definition of femvertising that it is a type of advertising aiming to empower women is closely related to gender roles in advertising, a topic that has attracted considerable interest from advertising scholars. Although femvertising is an underexamined area, advertising has long been known for using gender-role stereotypes to promote products and services. A voluminous stream of literature has focused on gender-role stereotypes in advertising since the 1970s.

Gender-role stereotypes is a belief that certain traits, characteristics, role, and behaviors differentiate men and women (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). The simplification and systemization of gender roles make it easier for people to make sense of the world (Eisend, 2010). However, despite the fact that gender stereotypes can benefit people by offering helpful navigation in day-to-day life, it could easily fall into the trap of oversimplification and misapplication which, according to Eisend (2010), may result in the restriction of subjects' life opportunities. For example, women's participation in social affairs will be restricted if their role as housewives is taken for granted.

The pioneering work in this field is McArthur and Resko's (1975) research on the portrayal of man and women in American television commercials. McArthur and Resko's work

reveals the differences between the portrayal of man and women in advertising that women were generally portrayed in an “unfavorable” manner, particularly as unknowledgeable and dependent on men (McArthur & Resko, 1975). Based on McArthur and Resko’s findings, Erving Goffman (1979) proposed gender stereotypes categories in his study based on gender portrayal in print advertisements. He points out that advertising serves to convince the audience that the stereotypical images of man and women in advertising are the real and ideal images of them. Together, McArthur and Resko’s and Goffman’s work lay the foundation for follow-up studies on gender-role stereotypes in advertising (Döring & Pöschl, 2006). Indeed, a meta-analysis of studies in this field between 1984 and 2007 confirmed it by showing a tendency to depict women as passive and deferent in advertising in sharp contrast to man’s image as powerful, autonomous, and knowledgeable (Eisend, 2010). In general, the depictions of women in advertising is regarded to be more decorative, family-oriented, demure, but less professional (Uray & Burnaz, 2003).

Although gender stereotypes have existed in advertising for more about fifty years, the last decades have witnessed a robust change in women’s images in advertising. In their review of all articles concerning gender-role stereotypes in advertising from 2006 to 2016 in four key advertising journals, Grau and Zotos (2016) detected a waning tendency of traditional gender stereotypes. This is supported by other scholars. For example, Rubie-Davies, Liu and Lee's (2013) study on television advertising in New Zealand shows that man and women are less likely to be portrayed in previous stereotypical roles; in her content analysis of print and television advertisement, Wolin (2003) also suggested that the use of gender-role stereotypes in advertisement is declining. Although gender stereotypes are still prevalent in advertising (Eisend, 2010), the changes of family role structure and labor force have resulted in a new tendency of women’s role in advertising (Grau & Zotos, 2016), known as femvertising.

## **2.4. Femvertising and feminist studies**

Because of its time and space limitation, advertising often uses simplified gender roles to obtain quick identification from the audience. Such gender-role stereotypes have drawn attention from feminist. Many studies were conducted to explore this phenomenon in feminist studies. As a new form of advertising that presents women in a way deviating from the traditional use of gender-role stereotypes in advertising, femvertising has also been studied by

many feminists once it began to spring up. In general, previous studies on femvertising in the feminist area mainly draw on the notions of commodity feminism and postfeminism. These feminist genres and their contributions to femvertising studies are introduced as follows.

#### ***2.4.1. Femvertising and Commodity Feminism***

In an article named “Commodity feminist,” Goldman, Heath and Smith (1991) introduced the term “commodity feminism” to define the phenomenon that feminism has been co-opted and commodified to achieve marketing purposes. In this sense, femvertising is a type of commodity feminism considering its nature as a communication tool used by organizations to meet their ends. Goldman and his colleagues criticized commodity feminism for it reduced feminism to “the status of a mere signifier or signified” (Goldman et al., 1991). Instead of destabilizing patriarchal hegemony, the commodity feminism serves for the interest of capitalist hegemony (Goldman et al., 1991). Feminism is no longer a social goal aiming to bring social transformation but become an individual lifestyle that can be easily achieved through consumption (Goldman et al., 1991). In this vein, the origin of feminism in criticisms of unequal economic, political, and social relations has been diluted by advertisers (Goldman et al., 1991). Such understanding of commodity feminism is recognized by many scholars and is frequently used to examine advertisement with women empowerment message. From their point of view, it is business organizations rather than female consumers will finally benefit from such advertisement (Murray, 2013).

However, some other feminists hold different views. For example, in her study of audience’s interpretations of girl power music, Hains (2014) suggested that commodity feminism could be a good introduction for girls to learn feminism as considerable encounters with commodity feminism are a foundation for girls to trace its source, namely to trace back to the basic notions of feminism. Scott (2006) is also opposed to the “anti-market prejudice” in feminist studies. By tracing back to the origin and the development course of feminism, Scott argues that feminism is inseparable from market and mass media (Scott, 2006). In the middle ground, we can find scholars like Sarah Banet-Weiser, who sees commodity feminism as ambivalent but also suggests that the influence of commodity feminism is limited (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

#### ***2.4.2. Femvertising as a postfeminist discourse***

Although it adopts the notions of feminism, the commodification of feminism employs a discourse different from traditional feminist discourses. Indeed, a great volume of literature



concerning femvertising regard it as a type of postfeminist discourse (e.g., Gill, 2008; Lazar, 2006; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012; Murray, 2013). This study adopts this viewpoint to examine femvertising as a postfeminist discourse. It is worth noting that postfeminism is not taken as a perspective in this study. Rather, it is the research object, namely the femvertising per se. The following paragraphs will explain it in more details.

Carefully review of the literature of postfeminist studies reveals four distinctive ways to understand it: (1) as an epistemological shift breaking from second-wave feminism (Brooks, 1997) ; (2) as part of continuous evolution of feminism, a stage after second-wave feminism (Budgeon, 2001); (3) as a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 2006); (4) as a sensitivity consists of empowerment, individual choice, and consumerism (Gill, 2007).

This study adopts the final approach to understand postfeminism as a distinctive ‘sensitivity,’ that regards postfeminism as the object of study (Gill, 2017) rather than an analytical perspective used to understand other objects. Hence, scholars become the analysts of postfeminist culture (Gill, 2017). Rosalind Gill firstly proposed this definition of postfeminism in 2007. Gill’s comprehension of postfeminism consists of six dimensions that closely correlate with each other, including “femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference” (Gill, 2007). As mentioned earlier, many scholars are critical of the notion of postfeminism. The critical readings of postfeminism are also can be found in Gill’s studies. To grasp a brief understanding of postfeminist sensitivity, Gill’s six dimensions and her critical readings of them will be introduced as follows.

To begin with, the obsessive preoccupation with women’s bodies is one of the most important features of postfeminism. According to Gill, female bodies can be the window to women’ interior world as it is a source that generates women’s power (Gill, 2007). However, the judgments of female attractiveness become increasingly intensified and extensive so that women are supposed to adopt “constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and re-modeling” to achieve and maintain their power (Gill, 2007, 2017).

Secondly, the shift from objectification to subjectification refers to a tendency that women are now portrayed as “active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so,” which is different from the previous depiction of women as passive and under-controlled objects. It is

also regarded as a higher and more profound form of exploitation because the external, male judge gaze has been internalized by women becoming internal self-discipline and narcissistic gaze (Gill, 2007).

The third feature of postfeminism is self-surveillance, self-monitoring, and self-discipline. As mentioned above, women are facing intensified regulations in more areas, including their psychological world (Gill, 2007).

The fourth principles of postfeminism are the notion of individualism, choice, and empowerment. It indicates that women are autonomous agents who are free from constraint so that every aspect of life can be attributed to their free choice (Gill, 2007). However, as Gill (2007) puts it, it ignores other factors that also contribute to male gaze judgments of females but shift duties to women (Gill, 2007).

The fifth dimension, the dominance of a makeover paradigm, refers to a process of producing 'new ethical selves' (Wood & Skeggs, 2004), in which solutions are provided after convincing women of the existence of flaws or dilemmas in their life (Gill, 2007). Noticeably, the makeover paradigm not only exerts influence on women's physical life but also extends to their psychic world (Gill, 2017).

Finally, postfeminism resurrects the ideas about the natural sexual difference (Gill, 2007) by (re-)eroticizing the difference between male and female and constructing it as sexy. Through presenting the natural difference between male and female, postfeminist discourse implies that existing inequalities are inevitable and, use Gill's words, "pleasurable" (Gill, 2007).

In general, there is a growing tendency in media to send messages to women about their psychological world, namely their "self-esteem, body positivity and confidence" (Gill, 2017). Such discourse implies that the existing inequalities are not caused by structural problems or cultural forces. Instead, it is women's lack of confidence that is to be blamed. In this sense, the solutions for inequalities become less disruptive as it is more likely to lie in personal characters and psychic dispositions rather than dramatical social changes (Gill, 2017). By doing so, a 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 2001) is also constructed to control women's feelings and the way they present their emotional states. However, as Gill (2017) pointed out, given the ubiquity of "structure of feeling" in practice, the psychological in postfeminism has not been sufficiently researched. She suggests that more studies should be done to explore the affective and psychic

life. The contribution of this study is thus to fill in this gap by addressing female consumers meaning-making and identity construction in regards to femvertising.

Beyond what has been discussed above, a full account of postfeminism also requires scholars to consider it as a transnational concept. With its historical origin from the west, its response to Western second-wave feminist activism and its cultural intimacy with western culture, the studies of postfeminism has long been limited to Western countries (Dosekun, 2015). Indeed, the West has been portrayed as a progressive and modern world for women compared with their counterparts -- women in the third world who are regarded as “still in need of feminism” regardless of their strengths or the local feminist histories (Sensoy & Marshall, 2010; Wilson, 2011). Although some studies have examined postfeminism outside the Western world, they tend to describe it as a tame and imitative derivation of Western postfeminism following the prevalence of consumer culture across the world (McRobbie, 2007, 2008). Hence, by focusing on femvertising in China, a third world country, this study can add a new lens to postfeminist studies.

To conclude, this research regards femvertising as a type of postfeminist discourse. Hence, attention will be paid to the six main features of postfeminism. This study will contribute to the literature by looking at female consumers' psychic life and providing a non-Western perspective.

# Chapter 3 A Consumer Cultural Approach

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In this chapter, the theoretical foundation of this study, the consumer culture theory, is introduced. The theory of cultural branding is firstly introduced, providing a basic understanding of femvertising. The second section presents an integrated model as the framework for the analysis part of this study. Theories concerning two main focus of this study, namely consumers' meaning-making and identity negation process, are introduced after the model as a supplementary. Finally, theories on Chinese consumer culture are also presented to enhance the understanding of the social context of the current study.

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Consumer culture theory (CCT) is an interdisciplinary research tradition seeking to understand the dynamic relations between consumers, marketplace, and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Scholars within CCT see consumer culture as a mediation in which cultural context and meaningful lifestyles collide with symbolic and material resources, which further shapes consumers' meaning-making and identity project (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Theories on consumers culture also emphasize the importance of consumers, regarding them as active interpreters of consumption (Mick & Buhl, 1992). Rather than being limited to consumption of tangible products, consumer culture embraces everything that can be transformed into commodities, no matter it is services, images, lifestyles or symbols (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Steenkamp, 2019).

When it comes to femvertising in this study, rather than concerning tangible products, this study focuses on the female empowerment discourse in femvertising regarding it as symbolical commodities that organizations want to sell to consumers. In this sense, femvertising becomes a resource for consumers to create meanings of their own situations in Chinese society. Given that both advertising and postfeminist studies are closely related to consumer culture and the focus of this study is consumers' perspective of femvertising, it is appropriate to choose CCT as the guiding theory for this study.

### **3.1. Cultural branding**

In his book “How Brands Becomes Icons,” Holt (2003) introduced the concept “cultural branding,” a branding strategy that turns a brand into the container for and performer of a cultural myth. The cultural myth here refers to a fictional story that addresses acute contradictions in society from afar (Holt, 2003). In a society, consumers with the same historical and cultural background share similar anxieties and desires in a society (Holt, 2003). By coping with consumers’ shared anxieties and desired identities, brands convey significant identity value to consumers as they can help address the conflicts between consumer’s social and personal identity. Consumers’ role here is to personalize the identity value conveyed by brands to fit their personal life situations (Holt, 2003), through which their purpose of lives and desired identity are created and reinforced. This process can be done through consumption, which is the brands’ ultimate goals: to increase sales.

In this study, Chinese female consumers who are unmarried after 25 years old share the marriage pressure, the “leftover women” discourse in femvertising target this group of women aiming to construct a story that can resonate with them. The purpose of this study is to understand how consumers interpret and appropriate this discourse. Model aiming to resolve this process is introduced in the following section.

### **3.2. The integrated model of consumers’ meaning-making and identity negotiation process**

This study aims to understand how consumers attach meanings to femvertising and how they use femvertising as a resource to negotiate their identity in society. Hence, an integrated model that includes consumers’ meaning-making and identity negotiation process is needed. Since femvertising is a form of cultural branding, the model should also enable the researchers to analyze the embedded cultural myth in femvertising. This study, therefore, adopts the dialogical model of consumers’ appropriation of countervailing cultural meanings (Figure 1) proposed by Thompson and Haytko (1997).

In their study of the meanings used by consumers to understand their conceptions and experiences of fashion, Thompson and Haytko (1997) reveal a complex cultural meanings

system embedded in fashion discourses. To be specific, humans have an ideological system consisting of folk theories about society and the self (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). It provides a great number of countervailing interpretive standpoints, which are adapted, juxtaposed, and combined by consumers to fit the situations of their daily lives (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). When they are exposed to fashion discourses, consumers can appropriate the countervailing meanings to “generate their own fashion narratives and metaphoric and metonymic references that negotiate key existential tensions” (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Although this model is firstly used to analyze fashion discourses, it has been widely used in multiple consumer culture studies since it was proposed. Given the focus of this study on “leftover women” discourse and its purpose to understand consumers’ meaning-making and identity negotiation process, it is feasible to apply this model as an analytical framework for the current study.

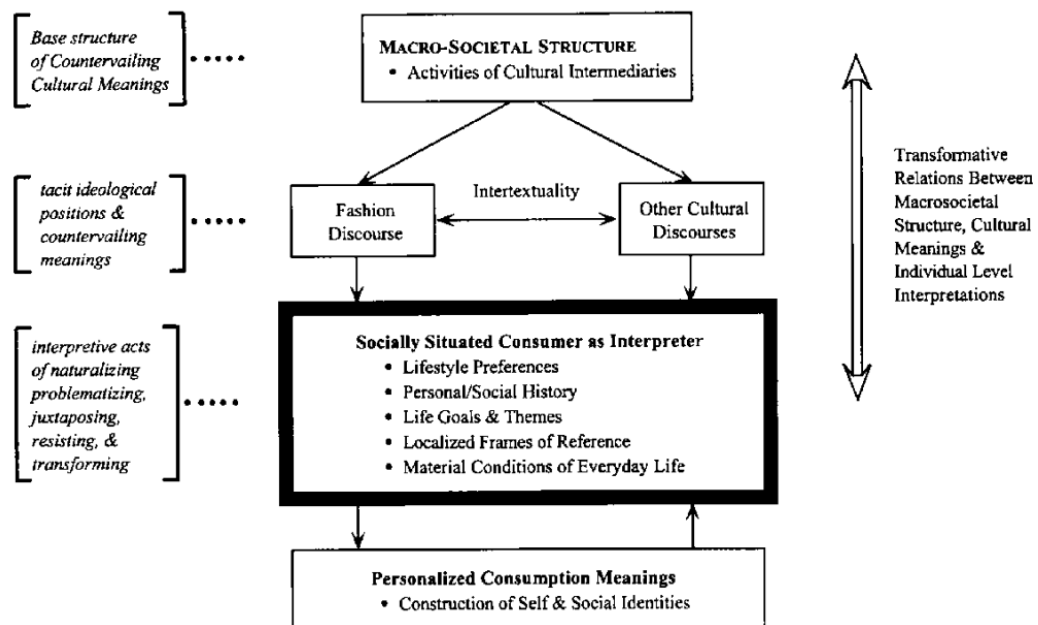


Figure 1: The Dialogical Model of Consumers’ Appropriation of Countervailing Cultural Meanings

As the model shows, the macro-societal structures of society offer a multitude of countervailing cultural meanings that “reflect the legacy of the ongoing social dialogue over the societal consequences of fashion phenomena” (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). In the current study, the element of fashion discourse in the model can be replaced by the “leftover women” discourse in femvertising. A series of cultural meanings with regards to issues such as gender, marriage, femininity are embedded in the “leftover women” discourse in femvertising. Given

the complexity of macro-societal, cultural meanings are usually countervailing. The macro-societal structures are the essential context for activities of cultural intermediaries, including advertising (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

The cultural intermediaries like advertisers then respond to the macro-societal structure by diffusing certain cultural established meanings through different forms of communication. The relations between the diffused meanings and the institutional structures are very discursive because the intermediaries are surrounded by various institutional forces and stakeholder interests (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). They can choose to follow a particular cultural meaning but can also juxtapose or combine several of them.

The discourse that manifests certain cultural meanings then encounters other countervailing cultural discourses, which can be simplified as fashion discourses and other cultural discourses (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). In the current study, the fashion discourse in the model can be changed to “leftover women” discourse in femvertising. The “leftover women” discourse in a certain piece of femvertising interacts with “other cultural discourses” in Chinese society. The “other cultural discourses” can be further specified to be other discourses concerning issues like gender quality, marriage, family relations. This stage is closely related to the next level of the model that consumers draw from a diversity of folk theories provided by these discourses to create meanings of their femvertising experience.

Based on the diverse ideological standpoints provided by the intertextual discourses, the personalized interpretation stage allows consumers to creatively interpret and reflect the discourses. Many factors can influence consumers’ interpretation including lifestyle preferences, personal or social history, life goals, and life themes, localized frames of reference, and material conditions of everyday life (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Drawing from these factors, consumers can interpret the discourse in different ways to fit their personal situations. The authors enumerate five ways of interpretation: naturalizing, problematizing, juxtaposing, resisting, & transforming (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Personalized meanings are further integrated into consumers’ construction of their personal and social identities (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). This is the process where macro-societal structures align with personalized perceptions.

It is worth noting that both consumers’ personalized meanings and identities are dynamic because the influence of social factors is not fixed. They can even circle back to

stimulate broader social changes in the hegemonic discourses and macro-social structures (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

In general, the model can provide a reference for the current from two aspects. On the one hand, this model emphasizes the importance of the encoded historically formed cultural meanings in consumer's understandings of current social phenomena. In this regard, the current study can apply this model to analyze how consumers use such countervailing discourse to attach emergent and personalized meanings to femvertising. On the other hand, this model also highlights how consumers actively employ and combine culturally formed fashion discourse in the way to fit the situations of their current social settings and their interests, life experience, and life goals. This strength can help the authors understand how female consumers use femvertising to negotiate their identity as "leftover women" in society. Given that this model examines consumers' meaning-making and identity negotiation at a more general level, theories that specifically focus on these two processes are also needed. Hence, the following two sections are devoted to specific theories on these two areas.

### **3.3. Meaning-making in consumer culture**

Consumers are not solitary subjects who passively receive information from advertising and make responses accordingly. Instead, they are interpretive agents whose ad experiences are subjective, driven by personal interest and situated in a sociocultural context to construct various meanings (Mick & Buhl, 1992). In this vein, the meanings of a piece of advertisement are not decided by organizations that design it and do not remain unchanged after the advertising is published. Rather, meanings are (re)constructed within the communication process (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). In their study of three brothers' readings of the same advertisements, Mick and Buhl (1992) pointed out that consumers reconstructed the meanings of advertisement by referring to their life themes and life projects rather than simply conform to the ideology presented by the advertisement. Their conclusion was supported by Ritson and Elliott's study (1999) that consumers often critically rework the meanings of advertising and use it as resources for humor, social interaction, and conversation. Therefore, this study will analyze the meanings consumers attach to femvertising by drawing from their personal conditions and life experience.



### **3.4. Identity construction and negotiation in consumer culture**

Belk's (1988) theory of core self and extend self sheds light on how identity is appropriated by consumers' in the consumption process. Based on a large body of previous studies, Belk concluded that consumers could use possessions, including persons, places, and things to which they feel attached, to extend and reinforce their identity (Belk, 1988). Although Belk (1988) defines identity as a coherent system, he also stresses that it is not a list of fixed attributes but is a series of flexible and dynamic attributes. Belk's claim was further developed by Ahuvia (2005), arguing that there is no need to separate extend self from core self. Instead, the senses of self consumers acquired from commodities such as products, ideas, and activities are also part of the core self. Although the tangible products are commonly mentioned in these studies, brands are also symbolic resources for consumers to construct the self (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), so do discourses in advertising. Therefore, in the current study, consumers' experience of femvertising is a consumption process of organizations' symbolic commodities, during which consumers integrate part of the symbolic meanings into their personal identity

The way in which consumers use symbolic commodities as resources for identity constructed should also be understood. Consumers' relationship with commodities is greatly influenced by the social nature of consumption as goods exchanges between humans (Ahuvia, 2005; Miller, 1998). Hence, consumers have a three-way relationship with commodities, namely person-thing-person. When applying CCT's identity theories to this study, it is important to examine how female consumers employ the symbolic meanings they create from femvertising in their relationship with other people.

### **3.5. Chinese consumer culture**

In addition to the meaning-making and identity construction theories in CCT that can be applied to address the research questions, good research employing CCT cannot be done without taking the "cultural complexity" of consumer culture into consideration. Consumer culture is a mediation in which various meanings, lifestyles, and values coexist, interact and cooperate in the consumption process to construct individuals' ideology in a society (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This requires a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the cultural context the research objects are situated. The understanding of the cultural context also enables the researcher to grasp the relevant cultural myth of "leftover women" discourse in this study.

As one of the largest markets in the world, China has attracted many scholars' attention. A great amount of research has been done focusing on Chinese consumer culture, both from macro and micro levels. As a socialist country, the existence of consumer society in China might be doubted. However, in their longitudinal study on advertisements in the people's daily, the largest government-own newspaper in China, during 1979 to 2003, Zhao and Belk (2008) admit the penetration of consumerist values in Chinese society and seek to understand Chinese society's transition from a communist country to a consumer society. They indicated that advertising was the representative of the rise of consumerism in China and communist ideological strategies including public support, socialist landmarks and socialist heroes, and anti-consumerist campaigns were appropriated to justify consumerist values in advertising (Zhao & Belk, 2008). In this sense, the mixture of communist ideology and consumerism should be taken into considerations by this study when analyzing the countervailing cultural meanings that impact consumers' interpretation and appropriation of femvertising.

Moreover, women's image in Chinese popular culture, including magazine and advertising, is also a topic many scholars are interested in. For example, in their study on female audience' perceptions of modern women in Chinese advertising, Hung, Li and Belk (2007) summarizes four types of modern women's images in magazine advertisement, including flower vase, cultural nurturer, strong women and urban sophisticate. Their analysis of Chinese female consumers' interpretive strategies and self-referencing responses towards these images shows that while embracing parts of Western femininity as being independent and self-sufficiency, Chinese women's ideal self is inclined to integrate more Chinese characteristics like being soft, chaste, determined and hard-working to distinguish themselves from their Western counterparts. Besides, drawing on notions of feminism and postfeminism, Thornham Sue and Feng (2010) came to the conclusion in their study of young females' perception of women's image in magazines in consumerist China that female images in today's Chinese magazines share the same loss of a specific feminist subject position with the postfeminist discourse in contemporary western popular culture.

To summarize, CCT is a comprehensive framework striving to systematically connect individual level meanings and consumption within the broader sociocultural context. Its' notions concerning cultural branding, the impact of countervailing cultural meanings, and consumers' meaning-making and identity construction will be used by this study to understanding Chinese femvertising from consumers' perspective.

# Chapter 4 Methodology

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This chapter outlines the methodological approach of the current study. The chapter is divided into four sections. First, the epistemology of the research design is introduced followed by the author's own standpoint in this study. Next, a brief introduction of the research design is presented with the argument of the methodological choices. The third part focuses on the data collection process giving a detailed description of how the study was conducted. This is followed by an explanation of how the analysis part is designed and conducted in this study. Reflections are presented after each section.

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## 4.1. Feminist Epistemology

### 4.1.1. *The Feminist poststructural perspective*

The purpose of this study is to examine what femvertising means for female consumers. This research endeavor demands a methodology that enables the researchers to grasp an in-depth understanding of Chinese female consumers' inner world. Given that feminism put great emphasis on women and concerns primarily with the invisibility and exploitation of women in social science (Prasad, 2018), it can provide the most relevant and suitable guidance for research design of this study.

The past few decades have seen a sustained interest in applying the notion of feminism in multiple research areas, including media communication and consumer research. This study is specifically based on the poststructural feminism identified by Prasad (2018) as a distinct tradition within feminism. Poststructuralism feminism attaches great importance to language and discourse because it holds that power is exercised through discourses (Prasad, 2018). Besides, all forms of knowledge production are inseparable from the power that puts women in a disadvantaged situation in society (Prasad, 2018). Conventional social science is regarded as the exercise of power because it privileges certain social groups in its process of turning chaos in daily life into categories of people in society (Harding & Norberg, 2005). The categories represent dominant political views because the causalities are assigned to these groups and the social relations between them, which makes it possible for these groups to control people's everyday life for their own benefits (Harding & Norberg, 2005). According to feminists, it is the man that enjoy the privileges so that women becomes disadvantaged groups that are marginalized and neglected by mainstream studies in social science. Compared to conventional

social science, poststructural feminism sees women as the central subjects of studies (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1990). Specifically, it is extremely interested in understanding women's life experiences (Prasad, 2018, p. 194).

Moreover, the general feminist tradition also opposes objectivity because they regard it as a sign of male-dominated science history (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1990). Rather, feminism encourages scholars to get close to research subjects because it holds that the world can be changed and reinterpreted in this way. This put demands on scholars who take a feminist approach in two aspects. The first one is to insert researchers into their research project. Researchers are required to be aware of their social location and the personal agenda that may impact the outcome of the study (Prasad, 2018, p. 194). The second one is to actively engage research subjects in research projects to minimize unequal relations between researchers and research subjects. This requires researchers to acknowledge that knowledge should be co-produced by researchers and research subjects and that power relations are inherent in the research process. Hence, scholars are suggested to invite research subjects to participate the design and text interpretation stage of a study (Prasad, 2018, p. 194-195).

Drawn on the notion of poststructural feminism, I will clarify my own standpoint in this study in the next section and be aware of the influence of my own standpoint on the outcome of this study. Research methods are also carefully designed in order to increase the involvement of research subjects in every stage of the study and to minimize the power inequality between studies and the subjects.

However, there are also some critiques of feminism for its attempt to categorize women as a separate group regardless of differences like race, religion, or nationality within this group. In this sense, feminism is at risk of attributing all problems to gender inequality. Taking this critique into heart, I will take broader social and cultural factors into consideration both in data collecting and analysis process. The diversity of the research subjects will also be discussed.

Consequently, by taking the poststructural feminist perspective, this study puts great efforts on clarifying my own epistemology of feminism, avoiding power inequality between researchers and research subjects, and discussing the diversity of the subjects. The following part of this chapter and the discussion chapter will address these considerations more fully.

#### ***4.1.2. My own standpoint to unpacking femvertising***

Before moving on to discuss research design and methods, I find it is necessary to reflect on my own standpoint in the study because how I situate myself in relation to research impacts my decisions on methodology, research design and even the final outcomes (Skeggs, 1997, p. 17).

To begin with, I am 26 years old now, which means I exactly fall into the range of the category of “leftover women”. As such, I am also labeled as ‘leftover’ and share similar feelings and anxieties as my subjects. The initial inspiration for this study came from my own experience with femvertising and the “leftover women” issue in Chinese society. Although I neither believe that women are inferior to men nor accept the “leftover women” label, I cannot deny that the label exerts pressure on me. My life experience results in the contradiction between who I am and what I am categorized as. Grown up in a small town, I was imbued with the traditional view that it is women’s responsibility to care for the family. I then went to college in a middle-size city and worked in an international company after graduation in one of the largest cities in China, during which I came across feminist theories, discourses and activities. Given the influence of tradition view on my childhood and the influence of feminism on my youth, my feminist identity is constructed by contradictions. In this study, I proceed from the belief that gender is a socially constructed concept and that men and women are born equal. Women can do what a man can. Nevertheless, I cannot avoid being affected by the social regulations on women and sometimes comply with them, either consciously or unconsciously.

I see the female empowerment discourse in organizations communication strategies as enlightening, but superficial. My understanding is that the history of feminism in China is short, and was commercialized halfway through. The commercialization of feminism makes it easier to be accepted but also dilutes it. However, I still appreciate every attempt to promote feminist ideas regardless of whether it is commercialized or not. This is reflected in my attitudes towards femvertising. I applaud the femvertising that seeks to empower women and raise women’s self-esteem, while at the same time I am alert of the commercial interest behind femvertising and skeptical of its ability to bring about real changes in the long term. However, it is better than nothing and hope it might make a difference in the future.

## **4.2. Research design**

### ***4.2.1. Qualitative approach***

The current study adopts the qualitative research method to study femvertising from consumers' perspective. There are three reasons for my choice. First, as mentioned earlier, one of the important gaps in prior studies on consumer' response to gender stereotypes in advertising is the lack of qualitative methods. Hence, one of the major contributions is to fill in this methodological gap. Second, people's meaning-making and identity construction are regarded as self-narrative. In order to collect consumers' narratives, a research method allows enough space for the subjects to tell their stories is required. Considering that qualitative studies focus on "the meaning people attach to things in their lives" by seeing the world from the subjects' eyes and experiencing the reality as they experience it (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015), it is an ideal choice for this study. Finally, studies based on feminist epistemology usually prefer data collecting methods that enable researchers to get close to their subjects. This can be done by qualitative methods because of their advantage of going into the subjects' life. Therefore, I conducted qualitative studies to answers the research questions.

#### ***4.2.2. Narrative interviews***

Among all the qualitative methods, participant observation, in-depth ethnographic interview, and discourse analysis are the most commonly used methods (Prasad, 2018, p. 194). Since consumers' encounter with advertising is a type of mediated experience, I realized it is difficult to grasp consumers' narrative through observation and discourse analysis. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p. 3) pointed out, rather than providing scientific explanations, interview can help researchers to see the world from interviewee's perspective. Hence, I take interview as my data collection methods.

As mentioned above, CCT regards meaning-making and identity construction as a narrative process conducted by individuals in the face of various commodities, including symbolic commodities like advertising (Ahuvia, 2005). Hence, I conducted narrative interviews to obtain stories told by interviewees. By doing this, I am able to not only understand the world from consumers' perspective but also go beyond the interviewee's individual story to see the broader social and cultural context that embodied in narrators' story (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The narrative interview can also help to minimize the power relations between researchers as this form of interview offers interviewees with such ample space to express their opinions. Therefore, by adopting narrative analysis, unprompted, vivid and unanticipated

answers can be collected. Interviewees might even provide answers that contain their unrealized or not daring to admit thoughts and feelings (Brinkmann, Kvale, 2015, p. 146).

### **4.3. Data collection methods**

#### ***4.3.1. Selection and criteria of interviewees***

My aim of this study is to use “leftover women” as an entry point to understand Chinese female consumers’ interpretation of appropriation of femvertising. In order to meet this end, I employed purposive sampling to recruit participants so that interviewees with more related information can be found. The criteria I use to select my participants is that they should fulfill the definition of “leftover women.”

In general, “leftover women” are defined as urban, professional females who are not married in their late twenties or older (Fincher, 2014). Although All-China Women’s Federation defined the age of “leftover women” as 27 years old in 2007 (Magistad, 2013), Fincher pointed out that this derogatory term has extended to cover women aged 25 (Fincher, 2014, p.16). Hence, the specific age I used for the criteria of “leftover women” is 25 years old, namely women born in and after 1994. The upper age limit is 41 years old since China’s reform and opening policy in 1978 took great changes to society so that the growth environment and life experience of women born in and after that year are highly different from previous generations. Besides, researchers have also summarized the characteristics of “leftover women,” including being highly educated, dependent, and self-supporting (Fincher, 2014). Hence, the education level of the respondents should be bachelor degree or above. Considering the Chinese education system that people would be about 23 years when getting a bachelor degree and be about 26 years old when getting a master degree if they do not take any gap year during this process, it is difficult for Chinese students to be fully self-supporting and independent from parents while they are already under the marriage pressure. Hence, I decided to include women who are still pursuing a bachelor or higher degree.

To conclude, the selection criteria of my participants are unmarried Chinese women who age between 25 and 41 (born between 1978 and 1994) and live in urban areas. They should have achieved a bachelor or higher degree or are still in the process of achieving it. If they have achieved a higher degree, they should have jobs or own business that can support themselves.

Although the selection criteria help me to narrow down the population of my potential subjects, it is still unrealistic to randomly selected interviewees from the study populations because of China's large population and the time and money it might cost. Therefore, the recruiting process is a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. I started to recruit participants by posting a recruiting poster in online platforms WeChat and Weibo.

Before going further, it is necessary to give a brief introduction of these two platforms because it can influence the credibility of data. WeChat is one of the most popular instant messaging apps in China like the combination of WhatsApp and Facebook. If you have a private WeChat account, you can chat with friends and within chatting groups, and share pictures, video and text about your life that can be seen only by people who have added you as friends. However, adding someone as friends in WeChat or being within the same chatting groups with someone in WeChat does not mean that you have a close relationship with them since WeChat is not limited to the circle of friends and acquaintances. Besides, you can also operate your public accounts to publish articles, pictures, or videos to all users of WeChat not matter they are friends of you or not. As noted earlier, I myself already falls into the range of "leftover women," so do many peers I know in reality. Hence, I posted the recruiting poster in the "friends circle" of my private accounts that can be seen by all of my WeChat friends and also in some working, alumni and interest chatting groups considering that most women in these groups are either high-educated or professional women. I also posted the recruiting poster in my public account, the followers of which are strangers I have never meet. My friends also help me to spread the poster in their "friends circles" and chatting groups. Another social platform, Weibo, is known as Chinese Facebook. It is one of the most popular social media platforms in China. Different from WeChat, people use Weibo more for entertainment and making friends with strangers, so most followers of users' account are strangers. Finally, I also requested the subjects to recommend potential candidates for my study after each interview.

All these recruiting methods worked together to help me recruit enough interviewees within time and budget limitation and benefits my study by helping me find "information-rich" participants with share insights to my research purpose (Patton, 2002). In sum, I got 21 participants. More details of the participants can be found from the appendix. However, I am aware that recruiting interviewees partly through my own social network may influence the credibility and the quality of the data. In order to minimize the negative impact of the recruiting methods, I excluded acquaintances in my study. I also try to diversify my subjects by recruiting



participants from different ages, regions, and industries. By doing this, I aimed to achieve a more general understanding of consumers' perspective of femvertising.

#### **4.3.2. Interview proceeding**

The interview consists of two main parts. The first part of the interviews is to present a piece of femvertising to interviewees. The femvertising is presented to obtain consumers' interpretation of it and to open the conversation. Since being "leftover" might not be a pleasant topic for women, it is better to have a concrete example to stimulate the topic. Actually, the using of selected materials in interviews can be found in many previous studies within CCT (e.g., Mick & Buhl, 1992). After presenting the femvertising, I started to interview the subjects about their understanding of the femvertising, their identity project, and other related life experiences. Although the narrative interview emphasizes that enough space should be provided to interviewees for the generation of self-narratives, I still designed an interview guideline (see appendix) because "leftover women" is a private issue that many respondents may not actively comment on. The interview proceeding is introduced as follows.

#### **4.3.3. The commercial**

I chose SK-II's "Marriage Market Takeover" commercial in 2016 as the example shown to the respondent. Since the "leftover women" discourse is the breakthrough point of this study, the femvertising presented at the beginning of the interview should focus on this issue. Although there are dozens of Chinese femvertising mentioning "leftover women" issue, many of them do not use it as their core theme but treat it as a subordinate element. SK-II's commercial was selected because it focuses only on the "leftover" issue.

This commercial is 4 minutes and 16 seconds long. It begins with the presentation of "leftover women's" pictures of childhood and youth period accompanied by asides from their parents and other people that urging them to get married. It is followed by scenes of these women's life where they are treated by others strangely. These scenes are accompanied by asides from the women about their understanding of being "leftover." After these, the commercial moves to those women's home where their parents express their great expectations of their daughters to get married. Then the matchmaking corner in Shanghai People's square, a place for parents to present their unmarried children's personal information to help them find a match, is presented interspersed with women's narrative of their understanding of the

matchmaking corner and marriage. The commercial is ended with a happy scene in which women and parents go to the matchmaking corner to see these women's professional and confident pictures and declarations that they want to choose their own ways of life. The parents seem to start to understand their daughters.

Despite its extreme focus on “leftover women” issues, this commercial was selected for more reasons. First, the commercial is part of SK-II's global campaign #changedestiny, which seeks to encourage and empower women to control their own destiny (“Marriage Market Takeover,” n.d.). In this vein, the women empowerment discourse in the commercial is not an irrelevant and isolated message but is a representative of the brands' broader strategic communication. Hence, studying this commercial can help enhance knowledge of the use of women empowerment discourse on strategic communication level. Secondly, the commercial not only presents “leftover women” as the leading actors but also includes their parents as representatives of institutional pressure from society. Hence, this commercial can provide rich content for the understanding of how women use femvertising to address the conflicts between individual identity and social identity. Besides, compared to other commercials, SK-II's commercial is designed to be a micro-documentary with real-world scenarios and ordinary people, which can provoke stronger feelings and more thinkings of the respondents. Finally, this commercial has achieved big commercial success and is regarded as an iconic example of femvertising in the Chinese market. The commercial went viral soon after it was published as being viewed more than 3 million times in Chinese video websites. It has also received more than 4, 000 likes, been shared about 20,000 times on SK-II's official social media page, and provoked considerable discussions in China. It finally increased the sales of SK-II in China by more than 50% within 9 months after it was published (Hymowitz & Coleman-Lochner, 2017).

Given its extreme focus on “leftover women, rich content, infectious form and big practical success, the SK-II's “Marriage Market Takeover” was selected to obtain more vivid and data-rich narratives from participants.

#### ***4.3.4. The interview guideline***

The interview guideline is primarily based on a previous study on young women's project of the self in consumer culture (Lambert, 2017). However, since my study specifically focuses on femvertising and “leftover women” issue rather than broader popular culture and I am also interested in consumers' meaning-making process, I adjusted the interview guideline according

to my own research purpose. I also got some inspirations from Sue and Feng's (2010) study on Chinese young women's perceptions of women's image in magazine ads and Jantzen, and Østergaard and Vieira's (2006) study on women's experience of feminine identity during their consumption of lingerie. In order to test my guideline and to embrace the participants' perspective stressed by feminist epistemology, I conducted two pre-testing interviews with two women belonging to study groups. Some small changes were made according to their suggestions and my own evaluations of the pre-testing interviews.

To be more specific, I showed the SK-II's commercial at the beginning of the formal interview, after which I asked the participants to interpret the commercial and share their related life experience. Questions are structured according to the countervailing cultural model introduced in the theory chapter consisting of four parts: meanings attached to the commercial, identity negotiation, the respondents' socially situated factors and their reflections of the interviews.

What is worth mentioning is that, in order to provoke self-narrative of the interviewee, I intentionally asked open questions and used leading words like "can you share your experience about...", "have you ever experienced..." or "can you tell more about your experience about...". Moreover, although I have prepared the interview guideline, I am fully aware that it is impossible to expect everything to happen as plan. Bearing this mind and considering that interviewees need enough space to tell their stories, I tried to make my interview guideline as flexible as possible by adjusting it to interviewees' answers and welcomed them to ask questions back.

#### **4.3.5. *Screen-mediated interview***

Given the distance from China to Sweden, most of the interviews were conducted in aid of online video chatting tools like Skype and WeChat except 1 interview was conducted face to face. Compared to emails or text chat, video chat is very similar to the face-to-face communication because of its characteristics of instantaneity, dialogue format and rapid turn takings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 174). It helped me overcome the distance limitation by giving me opportunities to communicate with more participants in China.

Using medium also has its advantage of eliminating embarrassment so that it is easier to address the subjects' private lives, especially in studies concerning sensitive or controversial

topics. Although the “leftover women” issue has been widely discussed in Chinese society, it is still a sensitive and private topic for many Chinese women. Hence, it is an advantage for me to interview them through video chatting tools rather than face to face. Actually, most interviewees were very cautious about this issue. Among 21 interviewees, 9 of them did not tell me their real name, 1 of them did not tell me the city she lived in, 3 of them are not comfortable with showing their face when talking about this issue. So I did audio interviews with these 3 interviews. What is the opposite is their volubility during the interviews, which is very interesting compared to their cautious attitude towards personal information.

However, I am also aware of the disadvantage of employing video chatting tools. For example, it might reduce the information about interviewees’ body language since the video box is small, which will further hinder the production of thick descriptions (Elmholdt, 2006). Besides, interviewers may lose control of the interviewee’s attention for lacking non-verbal communication like eye contact and facial expression. To overcome these weaknesses, I informed them before interviews about how much time it would take so they can be prepared for it. I also suggested they choose a quiet and private place where they can freely talk with me without distractions. During the interviews, I tried my best to show my involvement and interest of their stories by giving responses like smiling, nodding, and repeating sentences from time to time.

#### ***4.3.6. Ethical Considerations and reflections***

Ethical issues of interviews should also be taken into consideration. According to the ethical guideline provided by Brinkmann and Kvela (2015, p. 91-99), there are four major ethical issues that should be considered, including informed consent, consequences, confidentiality and the role of the researcher.

Given that giving too much information to interviewees may resulted in unauthentic answers that they think might meet my purposes, I only gave a brief introduction of the purpose of this study before the interview by informing them that the aim of this study is to understand their interpretation of femvertising and this may involve their opinions about love and marriage. Information about how the recording of the interviews will be used, who will have access to it, how confidential works will be done, and the potential risks and benefits of participating in this study were also given to them before the interviews. I totally respected interviewees’ decisions on whether to participate in this study or not, so I confirmed their willingness of participation

after giving the above-mentioned information and informed them that they could drop out from this study whenever they want. After interviews, more details about the study was given to them.

For the consequences of this study, the potential risk for interviewees is that they might have to face great social pressure if their information is released since “leftover women” is still a controversial issue in Chinese society. As mentioned earlier, many respondents are very cautious about their personal information. In order to comfort them, I promised that I would treat the interview recordings with caution. The participants were informed that this study is anonymous, so I would only refer to the extracts of their interviews by random make-up names, and private information that may be used to identify them will not be revealed. The recording would only be used for remembering the interview content, I was the only person with access to it, and it would be deleted once the transcripts were completed. I also gave every participant a small gift to appreciate their participation.

Finally, as this study takes a feminist approach, it is also necessary to consider critiques about the role of researchers in feminist studies that excessive intimacy with interviewees may result in fake friendship and commoditized rapport (Burman, 1997). Being too close with subjects may also hinder researchers from having a broader vision of their study because they may only focus on the positive aspects of their subjects. Therefore, I bear these critiques in mind throughout the whole study to avoid harming my subjects and to minimize personal bias.

#### **4.4. Narrative analysis**

In order to better understand female consumers’ interpretation and appropriation of femvertising, I decided to conduct narrative analysis of the stories. Since the focus of narrative analysis is to study “how protagonist interpret things” (Bruner, 1990, p. 51) and it attaches great importance to imagination and people’s involvement in story construction (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003), this method is well situated to understand the subject’s meaning-making and identity construction.

Within the narrative analysis genre, some researchers conduct structural analysis of narratives text believing there are common structures existing in every narrative (Barthes, 2004). Studying the deep-structure of a narrative text can enable researchers to understand the

meanings generated by the structure. While other researchers prefer interpretative analysis of narrative text arguing that a narrative is loaded with embedded and latent information. Hence, researchers should examine and uncover the “hidden symbolism of stories” and regard them as “the depositories of meaning and expression of deeper psychic, interpersonal, and social realities” (Gabriel, 2000, p. 15).

The current study takes the interpretative approach to look at the empirical material. The reason behind my choice is that the notion of the interpretive approach serves better to address the research questions of this study as it is highly used in consumer study to understand how consumer cognitively and affective response to advertising, brands, and interpersonal exchanges, which is exactly the focus of this study.

#### ***4.4.1. Analysis proceedings***

Drawing on semiotic and rhetoric studies, the interpretive approach of narrative analysis examines the data on three levels: storyline, opposition, and enthymeme (Feldman, Sköldbberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004).

The first level of analysis is to identify the storyline of the respondents’ narrative. In their article of how to conduct interpretative narrative analysis, Feldman and her colleagues used the term “storyline,” drawing from the notion of “plot”. A plot can organize a sequence of scattered actions, events, or experiences into a meaningful whole (Czarniawska, 2004). According to Czarniawska, the plot is the passage from one equilibrium to another. Simply put, a typical narrative usually begins with a stable situation is, which is broken by some forces or power (Czarniawska, 2004). Other forces then join to establish a second equilibrium, which is similar but not the same as the first one (Czarniawska, 2004). In this sense, identifying the plot of a story enable research to understand the conflicts between different forces in a story, which indeed is the aim of this study, namely to understand consumers’ social and personal identity conflicts.

The second part of the stories is the opposition. Both semiotics and rhetorics believe that meanings are created on the basis of their opposites (Feldman et al., 2004). Especially, one way to uncover meanings of discourses is to examine what the narrator implies as its opposite (Feldman et al., 2004). The oppositions in this study refer to the conflicts. Different from the plot that focuses on how different forces collide and reconcile, the opposition looks at the

conflict per se. By looking at the oppositions, the conflicts between the respondent's social and personal identity can be identified. However, it is worth mentioning that in many cases, the oppositions do not necessarily be two extremes (Feldman et al., 2004).

The enthymeme, an important element of classical rhetoric, is also examined in this study. An enthymeme is in form of an incomplete and careless syllogism (Feldman et al., 2004), missing part of which can be the major premise, the minor premise or the conclusion (Feldman et al., 2004). Instead of being logical binding, the enthymeme is a "plausible, likely, or probabilistic inference (Feldman et al., 2004). To be more specific, two characteristics of the enthymeme should be understood. On the one hand, an enthymeme is typically based on common sense but not rejects alternative possibilities (Aristotle, 2006). On the other hand, the logic within the enthymeme may be obvious, but it is not necessarily real (Aristotle, 2006). In this sense, the enthymeme can be fallible. By using enthymeme, narrators are able to avoid the potential controversies by formulating part of his argument as common sense (Feldman et al., 2004). Making explicit the enthymemes of a narrative enables researchers to understand the epistemological stand a storyteller embedded in his or her stories (Feldman et al., 2004).

The analysis of this study starts from the oppositions since it refers to the conflicts, the foundational element of a story. Then I turn to the enthymemes to identify the respondents' epistemological understanding of the conflicts. Based on the oppositions and the enthymemes, the storyline is constructed to see how the conflict arises, collides and finally re-establish the equilibrium, which uncovers the respondents' meaning-making and identity negotiation process. It is worth noting that the purpose of my analysis is not to construct the scattered story of a single interview but to combine and reconstruct various tales told by all interviewees into more enriched, concentrated and coherent stories of the whole studied group (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 253-258 ), namely the Chinese female consumers who belong to "leftover women".

#### **4.4.2. Coding**

The coding process was conducted with the help of the software NVivo. At first, I coded the empirical material by the questions asked during the interviews considering that the specific purpose of each question was already set in interview guideline. However, further reading of the data revealed that answers to each question overlap because interviewees frequently referred to other topics in one answer. Considering that the interpretive narrative analysis attaches great

importance to plots and conflicts, I coded the empirical material according to different conflicts I identified in the respondents' answers.

The coding process reveals three main themes in respondents' narrative: bachelordom, happiness, and marriage. However, it does not mean that other side themes were excluded from my analysis. I also identified some interesting subthemes, such as material conditions, self-realization, and personal choice. These side themes were also coded and examined as supplementary interpretations to support the main stories.

#### ***4.4.3. Translation***

In this study, the interviews and their transcriptions were all in Chinese, while the extracts of the transcriptions were translated into English. The reasoning for doing this is twofold. On the one hand, social and cultural factors are heavily involved in my study as both advertising and consumers continually interact with the broader social and cultural context. Hence, using the study subjects' native language can facilitate both the interviewees to provide information-rich and vivid answers and me to maintain the original meanings of their answers. On the other, by using interviewee's native language, I aimed to create a more relaxing and comfortable atmosphere for them, give them more authority, and minimized the power relations between my interviewees and me.

However, I'm aware of the potential drawbacks of the translating process. Misunderstanding and inaccuracy might rise in the translating process, especially considering that the Chinese language contains many implicit meanings, historical and cultural stories, and meanings can change according to contexts, punctuations, and tones. In order to avoid losing the original meaning of the interviewee's answer, I adopted the forward and backward translation strategies suggested by Brislin (1970). Follow-up questions were also asked during the interviews to ensure I understand the interviewee's answers in the right way.

#### ***4.4.4. Reflections of the analysis method***

Although narrative analysis has its strengths on addressing the meanings subjects associated with femvertising and their identity projects, it has its limitations since not everything can be integrated into narratives. Human subjects are never motivated by one drive as they are living with various social discourses leading to controversial experiences and ways of being (Frosh, 2007). In this sense, human subjects are fragmented and not all aspects of their experience can be integrated into one coherent narrative (Frosh, 2007). Keeping this in mind, I will not focus



only on the consistent part of the subjects' narratives or exclude those discordant fragments. Instead, attention will also be paid to the controversies and conflicts in the subjects' self-narrative.

Also, not all stories in the interviews are clearly bounded (Riessman, 2003). Stories can be told repeatedly in interviews with different accounts. Hence, it is not an easy task to put boundaries for them and select segments that most suitable for analysis. In general, all decisions were made to meet the ends of the study, but it is worth noting that every decision made in this process is interpretive.

# Chapter 5 Findings and Analysis

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Based on the theoretical insights, this chapter analyses the empirical material. This chapter is divided into three sections. One section focuses on one story identified from the respondents' narratives. Each section consists of two parts: the "reading" part that presents how narrators used rhetorical elements to construct their stories and the "analysis" that applies theories to examine the implications of the story.

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In this study, I identified three stories from "leftover women's" interpretations of the SK-II's commercial: bachelordom, happiness, and marriage. Each story contains various countervailing cultural meanings. The respondents accepted some of them while problematized others by drawing from other cultural discourses in society. This process is inseparable from consumers' social situated conditions. It reveals how the respondents attach meanings to the commercial and how they negotiate their identity as "leftover women" by using the commercial as a resource. The following sections will analyze the three stories more fully.

## **5.1. Stories of bachelordom: traditional vs. modern definitions of femininity**

"Leftover women" are the main protagonists of the SK-II's commercial, which shows how this group of women negotiates with their parents in terms of their marriage choice. But how do Chinese female consumers think about being single in reality? How different or similar are their ideas compared to what the women say in the commercial? And how do they understand the differences and the similarities? Answering these questions can help to address the research questions of this study.

The first story I identified from the empirical material is about bachelordom, namely "leftover women's" narratives of being single. This story draws from the respondents' interpretations of the women's image in SK-II's commercial.

### ***5.1.1. Readings***

#### ***Ture or false happiness***

When I asked the respondents to describe the “left women” in the commercial and whether these women’s image was in line with reality, some respondents identified themselves with the women in the commercial while others did not. However, after reviewing the transcript of each interview, I found all respondents show a certain degree of identification and denial, which can be a good entry point to construct “leftover women’s” story of being bachelordom.

For ease of understanding, I added some annotations in the excerpts cited below and marked them by brackets. Each excerpt can be identified by the name of respondents and their year of birth at the beginning:

Wanda (1994): Women in this video are so excellent, beautiful, independent, and confident that they don’t need to find someone to live with...They don’t need to live by the [traditional] definitions [of women] .... This video gives me a feeling, I don’t know why, that these girls ostensibly say they are strong and their lives are colorful, but why do they cry? If you really live a colorful life, you shouldn’t cry but should be proud of yourself saying I’m fine, you guys should mind your own business; I’m too busy to talk about this issue; or I’m proud of myself...[This makes me feel that] women in this video don’t really think their single life is wonderful. They are forced to be happy because they are not able to find their spouses. In reality, some women are real celibatarians and enjoy their single life. I think only this kind of women are completely unaffected by the pressure and the rumors [of “leftover women”] because they believe being celibatarians is delightful ... For me, celibatarians are cool. I really appreciate them ... [This video] is very interesting, but if they really want to solve the “leftover women” problem, they should show to the audience that being single is not a terrible thing...I’m not happy after watching this video. If I am a celibatarian, I will feel that those women speak not what they think...They do not show how wonderful single life can be.

Wanda’ narrative consists of several oppositions, namely conflicts in terms of bachelordom. The main and most apparent opposition is between “true happiness” and “false happiness”. This pair of opposition highlights the difference between the commercial’s and the respondent’s understanding of bachelordom. Wanda perceived women in the commercial as not really happy because they are plagued by pressure and rumors in society. However, she believed that “leftover women” in reality are not affected by others’ judgment and they really

enjoy their single life. The other pair of oppositions that support the main opposition are “living according to the traditional definitions of women” and “choosing one’s own way of life. They further explain the differences between “true happiness” and “false happiness,” which could be more explicit when looking at the enthymemes.

I derived two enthymemes from Wanda’s narrative. The implicit statements in the enthymemes are presented in italics to facilitate identification for readers.

The first enthymeme is based on the opposition between “living according to the traditional definition of women” and “choosing one’s own way of life”:

Being excellent is a resource of power for women to choose their own ways of life.

“Leftover women” are excellent.

Therefore, “leftover women” choose to be single.

By praising the appearance and the inner strength of women in the commercial, the respondent indicates that women with good appearance and inner strength have the right to choose their own ways of life. Therefore, being single becomes “leftover women’s” self-selection rather than the helpless outcome that they are forced to accept. Simply put, “leftover women” are not left over by man. Rather, it is women themselves that decide to stay single. Once women make up their mind to be single, others’ judgment can hardly affect them so that they enjoy their single lives. This allows for further reading when referring to true or false happiness:

People are truly happy if they voluntarily choose their lifestyle.

“Leftover women” voluntarily choose to be single.

Therefore, “leftover women” are truly happy.

This is the respondent’s foundational understanding of bachelordom. She regarded having the freedom to choose one’s lifestyle as the main arguments for her conclusion that women are truly happy.

### *Enjoyable single life*

Wanda's narrative of the bachelordom story is on a general level. To further probe into it, I turn to other respondents' story of "leftover women's" single life. These two narratives are selected because they include a common theme mentioned by most respondents:

Lana (1988): In general, they [women in the commercial] are confident and have good incomes. Their incomes are high enough to support their own life and even their family-of-origin. They can live a good life without depending on others.

Belle (1987): They [women in the commercial] have careers and are single. For me, I think their lives are so stable that they wouldn't rush to [get married]. To put it simply, they get used to their single lives. I also enjoy my life. I'm not in a hurry [to get married] ... I go to work and then go to the gym after work. It is strange that I enjoy solitude more than before. I'm less willing to go out with friends to have dinner or sing karaoke than two years ago. I meet friend now and then but the frequency decreases. I just watch TV, read books or go jogging by myself.

Both respondents mention some details of "leftover women's" single life. Although the respondents describe "leftover women's" single life from different aspects, their narratives tell the same story about why and how "leftover women" enjoy their single life. The main opposition here is "rushing to get married" and "enjoying single life". The "rushing to get married" and "enjoying single life" discourse here are the respective embodiments of the opposition introduced earlier: "living according to the traditional definitions of women" and "choosing one's own way of life". For these respondents, they enjoy their current life status, namely being singletons, and do not have enough desire to change it by getting married. However, what traditional definitions of women urges women to do is the opposite. By proposing the concept of "leftover women", the society aims to pressure women aged over 25 to ease their single life to enter into marriage. Based on this opposition, I developed an enthymeme:

People resist changing their life status if they enjoy their current lives

"Leftover women" enjoy their current single life materially and mentally.

Therefore, “leftover women” do not rush to get married.

In general, “leftover women” do not regard being single as an unpleasant life choice. Their economic conditions make it possible for them to achieve self-sufficiency. Besides, their single life is so stable that they have gotten used to it. Both the material factor and mental factor result in their resistance to hasty changes of lifestyle.

Based on the oppositions and the enthymemes, the storyline of respondents’ bachelordom story can be constructed:

The commercial’s portrayal of “leftover women” contradicts with the respondents’ understanding of “leftover women’s” life. The commercial focuses on the tragic side of “leftover women’s” life implying that “leftover women” are not truly happy because they are affected by the traditional definition of women and cannot ignore others’ judgment. However, the respondent holds that “leftover women” are truly happy because they choose to be single and are unaffected by others’ judgment. They enjoy their single life materially and mentally, so they do not rush to change their current life status, namely to get married.

In general, the only aspect the respondent identified with the women is their good appearance and inner strength. However, the commercial does not present the power of these qualities as the respondent expected, namely as a resource for freedom choice. According to the respondent, the commercial focuses too much on the negative aspects of “leftover women’s” life and the way it constructs the discourse shows a kind of logic inconsistency. In this sense, the commercial’s women empowerment message is very superficial, only staying around the surface, and the logic inconsistency further weakens its empowering force.

### ***5.1.2. Analysis: the failed cultural myth of the tension between two versions of femininity***

From the story of bachelordom, we can find that the respondents made a critical reading of the single women’s image in the commercial. Given that the aim of femvertising is to empower women, SK-II’s commercial should arouse identification from consumers rather than the opposite. Hence, it is necessary to explore why this happened and what does it mean for femvertising. In addition, how consumers’ meaning-making and identity negotiation were

conducted through critical readings should also be explored.

The “leftover women’s” image in the SK-II’s commercial is interpreted by the respondents as a representative of traditional femininity. According to the respondents, although the commercial portrays “leftover women” as beautiful, confident and professional, they actually internalize the traditional view of women that women should get married at a marriageable age. That is the reason explains why women in the commercial are plagued by marriage problem and do not really enjoy their single life. However, the respondents are against such traditional femininity but pursue a type of modern femininity that recognizes women’s independence, free choice, and professional success. This is where the conflict arises.

The cultural meaning that requires women to get married at a certain age reflects the reconstruction of traditional Chinese femininity in the post-Mao era. Chinese traditional femininity required women to be soft, gentle, and obedient (Johansson, 1998). In the Mao years, specifically between the 1950s and 1970s, the traditional femininity was abandoned as the gender difference was eliminated to encourage women’s participation in the workforce to promote national economic development (Andrews & Shen, 2002). However, after the Mao years, there was a reconstruction of traditional femininity by government support media (Johansson, 1998). The traditional femininity of being soft, reserved and submissive was stressed again (Johansson, 1998). The reconstructed traditional femininity recognizes that women can be educated and intelligent, but it also claims that women should not show off their knowledge and intelligence (Johansson, 1998). The main duty of women is still to take care of their family (Johansson, 1998).

However, the conduction of China’s reform and opening policy in 1978 again opened up opportunities for women to take an active part in the labor market. Women grew up after the implementation of the policy have embraced a new definition of femininity that women can support themselves solely by the labor of their hands and that women can choose their own ways of lives. The ability to serve husband and child is no longer the only criterion for a good woman.

The tension between reestablished traditional femininity and modern femininity is one of the main conflicts women meet in today’s China. The release of this commercial shows that SK-II realizes the cultural opportunity created by the conflict. By paying attention to “leftover women”, SK-II aims to get approval from its targeted audience, namely women aged over 25, through aligning the brand’s myth with the tension in Chinese society. However, the way SK-II constructed the discourse of “leftover women” fails to convey a compelling identity because

it draws more from the reestablished traditional femininity rather than the modern femininity.

Applying the countervailing cultural model shows that respondents' desired identity of modern femininity is not groundless. Rather, it results from their material conditions and life goals. As Lana stated, "leftover women" usually have a good income to support high-quality lives and even to support their family of origin. Such material conditions allow them to be independent of man and feel satisfied with their current life. "Leftover women's" life goals also play an important role in their choice of lifestyle. When I asked the respondents about their role model in daily life, Paige (1992) told me that she admired Cai Jing, a famous journalist and a compere in China:

Paige (1992): She makes people feel comfortable. But when you meet her, you will feel awed by her. The way she speaks and acts is not only gentle and moderate but also generous and mellow. You won't purposely find fault in her or make nonsense jokes with her. You will respect her naturally because of her personality charm. I think only people with inner peace, in-depth knowledge, and good manner can act like this. I really appreciate her.

From Paige's description, we can find that the qualities modern women appreciate do not fit the traditional femininity. Although she mentioned the quality of being gentle and moderate, she also highlighted that the women are venerable and mentally strong, which are not the welcomed qualities of women according to traditional femininity.

However, it is worth noting that consumers' problematization of the commercial does not mean it provides nothing meaningful for consumers' meaning-making and identity negotiation process. Indeed, SK-II's commercial is not effective on inducing empathy since it fails to create the cultural myth. However, by problematizing the miserable image of women in commercial, the respondents clarified their personal understanding of being single. When the audience talks about the advertising that they like or dislike, they are inevitably positioning themselves in relation to others (Buckingham, 1993; Ritson & Elliott, 1999). Hence, when talking about how they dislike the "leftover women" discourse in the commercial and how their understandings of bachelordom are different from the commercial's, the respondents negotiated their identity of "leftover women" through positioning themselves against the traditional femininity.



## 5.2. Stories of happiness: collectivism vs. individualism

### 5.2.1. Readings

In her narrative of “leftover women’s” life theme, Wanda emphasized the differences between the mirthless women in the commercial and happy women in reality. However, as the conversation developed, I asked her if the women’s image in this commercial fits the reality, her answer is:

Wanda (1994): It fits very well [with the reality]. There are so many examples [in reality]. My colleagues, especially those women who live close to their families, are pressured to get married every day. Women like me, especially women at our age, 25 or older, are the salient target of marriage pressure.

Wanda is not the exception. In fact, all respondents agree that the commercial partly reflects the reality, especially the pervasiveness of marriage pressure. Just like the question Wanda asked: why do they cry if they say that they live a colorful life, this question also arises here: if “leftover women” are truly happy, why do they still feel the pressure of getting married and why do they think the commercial fit the reality?

### *Conflicting definitions of happiness: form vs. feeling*

To address these questions, I turned to the respondents’ narratives about their pressure of getting married, where I identified the story of happiness. When I asked the respondents to describe the conflicts between “leftover women” and their parents in the commercial, many respondents emphasized the differences between the two generations’ definitions of happiness. Among them, Queenie’s statement is very typical:

Queenie (1994): Parents of professional women are under great pressure because they hope their daughters can have a happy family and marriage. Actually, I think professional women also think this way, but they concern more about the feelings rather than the forms [of happiness] ... Parents’ generation’s experience of happiness is less diversified than our generation’s. Our post-90s generation is more sensitive to our feelings while the parents’ generation is insensitive to them. In the day of our parents, there was no voice around them

telling them that true love was important. Instead, when they turned the marriageable age, their parents talked with them, they met potential spouses, and then everything was done. However, our generation has more opportunities to contact society and are clearer about our own thoughts. There are also encouraging voices in the society like this commercial. Hence, more people start to consider their own feelings, which makes them more cautious in the face of marriage and feel that living alone is not as horrible as imagined. Parents also overestimate the care a woman receives from a man in a marriage. That's what I thought: women can also take good care of themselves.

In general, the story about "happiness" rests on the conflict between "the form of happiness" and "the feeling of happiness." The main opposition is supported by two sub-oppositions: "acting your age" and "ignoring your age," and "relying on man" and "self-reliance." The narrator believes that both "leftover women" and their parents seek for happiness, but there are conflicts between two generations' understanding of happiness. Parents' understanding of happy focuses more on the form of happiness, namely marriage. The form of happiness requires women to get married at the marriageable age to receive care from men. On the contrary, the post-90s generation, to which most "leftover women" belong, concerns more about their own feelings. Therefore, they do not see marriage as the only way to obtain happiness and believe that they can take good care of themselves.

Based on these three oppositions, I developed three enthymemes from the happiness story. The arc of these enthymemes moves from (1) an explanation of parents' generations' understanding of happiness and how this way of thinking came into being, to (2) an explanation of "leftover women's" understanding of happiness, to (3) an argument that they share the same goal.

The first two enthymemes below describe what "leftover women" think happiness means to their parents and why their parents think in this way:

- (1) Less diversified experience of happiness, less contact with society, and less encouraging voice in society make people insensitive to their own feelings.

Parents' generation has such life experience.

Therefore, parents concern more about the forms than the feelings of happiness.

(2) The form of happiness requires women to get married at a marriageable age and receive care from men.

“Leftover women’s” parents concern more about the form of happiness.

Therefore, parents urge their daughter to get married to make their daughters happy.

The narrator framed her parents’ definition of happiness as an unavoidable time product, which exerts great pressure on their parents. Her narrative shows her empathy with her parents. The cause of “leftover women’s” definition of happiness is not fully covered here, but from the respondents’ narrative, we can see that the cause is the social context opposites to the one their parents once inhabited in.

Although in bachelordom story, “leftover women’s” understanding of happiness was discussed to some extent, the following enthymemes dig deeper into it:

*(1) Marriage is a form that cannot ensure the happiness of women.*

“Leftover women” want to be truly happy.

Therefore, “leftover women” do not regard marriage as the only option of obtaining happiness.

(2) People do not need to seek care from others through if they have the abilities to take good care of themselves.

“Leftover women” have the abilities to take good care of themselves.

Therefore “leftover women” do not need to seek care from men through marriage.

These two enthymemes summarize the respondents’ arguments for their opinion of why “leftover women” are left over in the marriage market: “leftover women” do not think getting married currently can bring them happiness. Their abilities are good enough to support a good life, so they do not need to get married to a man to get support from them but can wait until the “right feeling” appears.

Based on the enthymemes about two generations' definitions of happiness, the final enthymeme focuses on "leftover women's" interpretation of the similarity between two generations' definitions of happiness. It further strengthens "leftover women's" empathy with their parents identified in the first three enthymemes:

"Leftover women" refuse to rush to get married because they want to be happy.

"leftover women's" parents urge their daughter to get married because they want their daughter to be happy.

Therefore, "leftover women" and their parents share the same motive.

Referring to their story about bachelordom, "leftover women" on the one hand enjoy their single life with the confidence of taking good care of themselves. On the other hand, they empathize with their parents believing that their parents urge them to get married out of kindness. When these two different standing points are internalized by one person, the contradictory that I mentioned at the beginning of this section arises. This explains why the respondents said she enjoyed her single life while at the same time regarded the miserable image of women in the commercial as a reflection of reality.

### *Communication as a way to address the conflict*

Although the conflict exists, "leftover women" have their way to address this conflict. At the end of the commercial, women and their parents go to the matchmaking corner in Shanghai where they see posters that present the confident and professional pictures of "leftover women" and their life declarations. The parents seem to finally understand their daughters and give up urging them to get married. When answering the question about their interpretations of the conflict between women and their parents in the commercial, 19 out of 21 respondents mentioned the importance of communication. Although the respondents regarded this ending as the outcome of communication, they do not completely accept it as an appropriate and effective way of communication. Instead, they came up with their own ways of communication.

When I asked Sallie about her understanding of the solution provided by the commercial, she responded:

Sallie (1992): I think this [the ending of the commercial] is a kind of solution. Some parents are more conservative while others are more enlightened. For those conservative parents, they may understand their daughters and feel relieved at that moment. However, they live in a society surround by people with a traditional view [of happiness]. This kind of parents cannot ignore what others say as we do, so they actually bear part of social pressure and public opinion for us...I think this solution won't do much to help "leftover women" and their parents. If it is me, I won't choose this kind of communication because this is an issue between my parents and me. Of course, I hope my parents can share my idea ... But if it's me, I will interpersonally communicate with my parents rather than discuss it in a public place. My marriage choice is relevant to my parents at most, but it has nothing to do with people except my parents.

In this narrative, I identified two conflicts. One between "leftover women" and their parents' attitudes towards public opinion. The other one concerns the nature of women's marriage, namely it is a private issue or a public issue. Three oppositions are used to outline the conflicts: "sticking to one's own ideas" and "easily affected by public opinion", "private issue" and "public issue", and "insider" and "outsider". According to the respondents, in the marriage issue, parents are greatly affected by public opinions while "leftover women" stick more to their own ideas. Besides, by presenting women's pictures and life declarations in the matchmaking corner, the commercial turns marriage into a public issue while the respondents regarded it as a private issue that should not be discussed with outsiders. Here, the insiders refer to "leftover women's" parents while the outsiders are people except for their parents.

Two enthymemes are generated from this story. The first one addressing the conflicts between two generations' attitudes towards public opinion by focusing particularly on the potential effect of the solution provided by the commercial.

The effect of a solution cannot last long if the targets are easily influenced by other discourses.

Conservative parents are easily influenced by public opinion that appreciates traditional femininity.

Therefore, the effect of the solution provided by the commercial cannot last long.

The second enthymeme deals with the conflict that marriage is a public or private issue. All parts of the enthymeme are explicit and it works as a bottom line for the respondents.

One's marriage choice is a private issue that should not be discussed with outsiders.

“Leftover women” regard their parents as insiders.

Therefore, “leftover women” prefer to discuss their marriage choice with their parents privately.

This enthymeme indicates that respondents characterized their marital choice as a private issue that should not enter public space. Only their parents have the right to intervene their marriage choice while others do not. However, taking their argument that parents are easily influenced by public opinion into account, society has exerted pressure on “leftover women” through their parents. In this sense, the “leftover women's” marital choice has already become a public issue.

After examining the oppositions and enthymemes of the story, the storyline comes to the surface, which is presented as follows:

Although both “leftover women” and their parents pursue happiness, there are conflicts between two generations' definitions of happiness. The parents' generation cares more about the form of happiness, namely marriage, while the “leftover women” focus more on feelings of happiness, which do not necessarily come from marriage. The different version of happiness results from the different social context in which two generations inhabit. The respondents believed that the conflicts between two generations' definitions of happiness can be addressed by communication. However, the way adopted by the commercial is not accepted by the respondents because it turned women's marital choice into a public issue while the respondents regarded their marriage as a private issue that should only be discussed with insiders, namely their parents.

***5.2.2. Analysis: a half successful cultural myth of the tension between collectivism and individualism***

From the readings of the happiness story, again we identify countervailing cultural meanings of femininity that has discussed in the analysis of bachelordom story. Since it has already been covered, this part turns to the other countervailing cultural meanings that are also significant in happiness story: collectivism and individualism. In general, SK-II successfully creates a cultural myth of the tension between collectivism and individualism in the former part of the commercial. It is done through two generations' definition of happiness as the respondents recognized and juxtaposed them by constructing their understanding of what is these two definitions and how they came into being. However, it failed in the latter part because it again falls to the camp that "leftover women" are against, which aroused critical readings. This section will analyze it more fully by applying CCT theories.

The analysis begins with the two countervailing cultural meanings: collectivism and individualism. Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Model quantitatively measures national culture from different dimensions, one of which is collectivism versus individualism (Hofstede, 2001). The difference between collectivism and individualism lies in whether people defined themselves as "I" or "we" (Hofstede, 2001). In a collectivist society, the ties between individuals are very tight (Hofstede, 2001). People prefer to integrate into groups expecting for other group members to take care of them (Hofstede, 2001). Contrarily, in an individualist society, people are more likely to depend on themselves and their immediate family (Hofstede, 2001).

The individualism index of China is 20 (Hofstede Insights, n.d.), a very low grade, which indicates that China is a typical collectivist society. According to the respondent, her parents are concerned more about form than feeling because they grew up in a time when collectivism occupied the mainstream. The collectivist nature of Chinese society is evidenced by the respondents' life experience:

Kali (1994): When they visit our house, my aunts [female elders] told me that I was at the best age to get married and I would regret if I don't take the opportunity. There were also some people telling me that they get married too late so that they feel too tired to look after their children now because they are old. Or others shared some cases with me that excellent women became spinsters because they didn't get married as early as possible.

This excerpt vividly shows how “leftover women” is surrounded by collectivists that keeps urging them to get married. Here, “aunts” do not necessarily refer to sisters of one’s father or mothers. They can be any female elders. As Hofstede (2001) pointed out, the range of family in a collectivist society extends to include more members. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and even neighbors are included in the extended family.

However, as Johansson (1998) pointed out, a tendency of individualism is starting to prevail in China. People are more willing to stand out from the crowd to express themselves (Johansson, 1998). The society’s appreciation of self-sacrifice gives way to self-realization. Following other people’s suggestions and directions are no longer as important as it used to be (Johansson, 1998). “Leftover women” inhabit in such a time when the tide of collectivism has not completely receded while the individualism has already risen. From the respondents’ earlier narrative, their desired identity is to be individualists as they care more about personal feelings rather than marriage, a path many people follow to achieve happiness.

In the former part of the commercial, SK-II shows how two generations’ definition of happiness contradicts to each other. It successfully creates the cultural myth that represents the tension between collectivism and individualism because the respondent recognized the existence of different understandings of happiness. She juxtapositioned it by formulating explanations for the conflict based on her personal history and life theme. However, the latter part of the commercial started to address women’s marital choice as a public issue, which is regarded by the respondent as the adoption of collectivism because presenting women’s picture and life declarations in a public place is a way of seeking public support. In this sense, being single is no longer women’s personal choice anymore. The respondents’ problematization of the solution provided by the commercial shows that this part failed to represent “leftover women’s” desired identity.

### **5.3. Stories of marriage: hinder vs. boost of women’s self-development**

#### ***5.3.1. Readings***

##### ***A narcissistic gaze***



The women in the commercial mentioned many times that they are eager for love and they do not want to get married until they found their true love. We can also identify similar considerations from the respondents' narratives. They do not completely reject marriage but have clear criteria for it. This section, therefore, aims to construct "leftover women's" story of marriage.

Lana (1988): In the past, a woman's duty is to stay at home to serve husbands and educate children. But it has changed now. Entering into a marriage is not the only way for women to live a good life, especially for women working in big cities. These women obtain more opportunities and better development in big cities. For them, the cost of entering into a marriage is very high. The only thing that can make you give up what you have achieved [in career] is true love. However, not everyone can meet the true love in her life. In this situation, it depends on whether you can make do with it [get married to someone who is not your true love]. If you can't, then you voluntarily choose to be left over.... In a good marriage, people are the most important factor. I attended several blind dates before. My first criterion of [my other half] is that the man should at least have one impressing quality .... Because it [the man's good quality] can encourage me to become better and both of us can make progress together after marriage. Other stuff like house or car is not important for me. We can strive to buy these together after marriage. However, if a man is able to impress me or women with similar personal conditions like me, he is not likely to have a low education level or indecent job, at least not worse than ours. I learned this from my blind dating experiences that if a man's personal conditions are worse than yours, you will pose pressure on him and his family. After all, marriage is about two families. You will pose a threat to the man's families if your economic condition is superior to his .... So, if a marriage cannot make me live a better life than the present, why should I do this [getting married]? By getting married, you voluntarily change your life status, so it [your life] should be better, rather than worse.

The narrative is about "leftover women's" requirements and expectations of marriage. The conflict here lies in the meaning of marriage for women, which included several oppositions. One of the main oppositions is "getting married to the right one" and "making do

with any man”. Referring to “leftover women’s” idea of happiness that feeling outweighs form, they prefer to get married to the loved one rather than to marry anyone to satisfy their parents. In this case, the loved one is not any man. They are most likely high-educated and well-paid man who can make progress with their wives after marriage. Another important opposition here is “cost of marriage” and “gain of marriage”. The respondent believes that women with good career have to sacrifice a lot for marriage. By getting married to their loved one, women can minimize their loss to a great extent and even achieve self-development.

These two oppositions allow me to construct two enthymemes from the respondent’s narrative, which not only base on the cited transcript here but also draw from previous arguments of other stories:

(1) Getting married to one’s true love can bring happiness.

“Leftover women” want to be happy.

Therefore, “leftover women” want to get married to their true love.

(2) Getting married to high-educated and well-paid man can make both husband and wife become better.

“Leftover women” want to achieve self-development in a marriage.

Therefore, “leftover women” want to get married to high-educated and well-paid men.

In the bachelordom story, the respondents believe that “leftover women” already live a happy and high-quality life, so they resist to hasty change of their lifestyle. The marriage story here suggests what the respondents think can bring about better lives after marriage: entering into marriage with an outstanding man. Different from the bachelordom story that focuses on women themselves and the happiness story in which the respondents show sympathy with parents, in the marriage story the respondent started to involve man as an equal partner to bearer marriage pressure with them. Although there is no male contemporary in the commercial, many respondents actively shared their opinions about men based on their personal experiences. In many interviews, including Lana’s interview cited here, the respondent implicitly put themselves in a higher position than man by criticizing the terrible man they met in blind datings

or saw in daily life. In this sense, the respondents' discourse of men is a narcissistic gaze that can exert pressure on men.

### *A self-deprecating expression*

The other two stories show conflicts in the respondents' narratives, the same as this one. Although Lana's narrative of marriage implies a narcissistic tendency and she also told me that she supported her brother to buy a house in her hometown, she downplayed her contributions to a family when answering other questions. When I asked the respondents how different their life would be if they are men, many respondents turned to the positive part of men's lives that they have more freedom, wider ambitions, and higher responsibilities. However, when I asked if they are willing to become man, most of them replied "no" and referred to reasons that contradict to their confidence in women's abilities:

Abby (1990): women's souls are more sensitive and more mature [than man's]. It is easier for women than men to meet a certain height of spirit as we usually say that women's mental age is older than man's. Because women are more sensitive, they can consider things from different aspects. Women's lives are also easier than man's lives [in society] because women don't need to undertake so many responsibilities. For example, the father is always the pillar of a family and the mother's pressure is not as intensive as the father's.

This citation is a mixture of narcissism and self-deprecation. Taking Lana and Abby's narrative together, we can identify a conflict between man and woman's role in a family. The opposition here is between "equality between man and women" and "more responsibility taken by man". On the one hand, the respondent believes that man and women should take similar responsibilities in a family and make process together after marriage. On the other hand, she recognizes man's dominant position in a family. The enthymemes of each argument are presented respectively as follows:

(1) Man and woman are equal in nature.

Man and women should take equal responsibility in a marriage.

Therefore, "leftover women" prefer to getting married to a high-educated and well-paid man so they can share familial responsibilities equally.

(2) Man and woman are unequal in nature.

Men should take more familial responsibilities

Therefore, women are easier than men in society.

The two enthymemes contradict to each other, which shows the conflicts in terms of man and women's role in Chinese family. Based on what has analyzed above, the storyline of the marriage story can be constructed as follows:

The respondents have a contradictory understanding of man and women's role in a family. On the one hand, they regarded man and woman as equal, which result in their high criteria of marriage and their potential spouses. In this way of thinking, marriage should be a boost rather than a hinder of women's self-development. On the other hand, women recognize man's dominant position in a family arguing that man should take more responsibilities than women.

### ***5.3.2. Analysis: a successful cultural myth of the tension between two family structures***

In the marriage story, there are countervailing cultural meanings concerning the family structure in Chinese society. Unlike the other two stories in which the respondents made critical readings of the related discourses in the commercial, the respondents identified with the view of marriage conveyed by the women in the commercial. In this sense, the commercial successfully creates a cultural myth addressing the tension between "leftover women's" contradictory understanding of gender role in marriage, namely the conflicts between patriarchal family relations and equal family relations.

To begin with, one important feature of the traditional Chinese family was the high status of man in the family and kinship system (Johnson, 2009). Such families are organized around male authority so that male members are the decision-makers in the families. In the traditional Chinese family, women's status was lower than men and were regarded as accessories for men. In this sense, their glory comes from male members of the family, like their father, husband, son or grandson.

It is obvious from Luna's narrative that she does not accept the patriarchal family relations as she identified with the women's discourse in the commercial that they want to get

married with their true love and also her description of her ideal marriage and her criteria of spouses. This shows a tendency that the respondent started to deviate from the cultural meanings of patriarchal family relations to adopt the cultural meanings derived from equal family relations. Actually, women's new view of family structure is not built in the air. As Lana told me that her personal conditions posed pressure on men in blind dating, many other respondents also shared their unpleasant blind dating experience, in which men did not perform well. It implies that the respondents' confidence comes partly from their life personal history. In addition to personal history, respondents also shared some localized frame of references that have influenced their vision of marriage.

Lana (1988): I have a colleague who randomly got married to a man around the time when I joined the company. That man is seven or eight years younger than her. Conversations with that man gave us an impression that he was irresponsible either as a father or as a son. The couple often throws each other out of the house after quarrels. We feel we would rather be single than living such a life.

Abby (1990): I like bloggers who are not only independent but also maintaining a good amphoteric relationship [with their other half]. For example, the relations between Xiaosajie [a blogger] and her husband is neck and neck. Both of them have their independent enterprise while at the same time they can support each other when necessary.

Both the negative and positive examples the respondents saw in their daily life help to shape their view of an ideal marriage. However, since the patriarchal family relations has long dominated Chinese family structure in history, it is difficult for the respondents to completely get rid of its effect. Hence, it is understandable that their narratives are inconsistent. In general, their desired identity is to be equal to man in marriage.

Although in the analysis of bachelordom story, we criticize the commercial for it fails to represent "leftover women's" happy life, in this story it succeeds in presenting women's desired identity and create a resonance between the audience and the women in the commercial. The identity value provided by the commercial is used by the respondents to strengthen their belief of remaining single before meeting the true love. By enriching the discourse, the respondents also attach personalized meanings to the commercial. Although the commercial

does not touch the topic of how lives would be if women enter into marriage with their true love, the respondents actively described their ideal marriage adding many detailed criteria and expectations to it. For them, marriage should not be the fetter for women but should be another platform where women can keep becoming better selves. In this sense, the commercial help to reserve their imagination of the good life after married to the true love implying that their wait will pay off one day.

# Chapter 6 Discussions

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This chapter further discusses the findings of this study. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses some common themes of three stories presented in the last chapter, namely postfeminist interpretations. It is followed by a discussion of the respondents' critical readings of the commercial to examine how it contributes to consumers' meaning-making and identity negotiation process. The final section turns to the contradiction between the findings of this study and the practice.

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The last chapter reads the empirical data and analyzes how Chinese female consumers attach personalized meanings to the commercial and how they use it as a resource to negotiate their identity as "leftover women" in Chinese society. In general, three stories are identified from the respondents' narrative: bachelordom, happiness, and marriage. In the story of bachelordom, the respondents problematized the miserable women's image in the commercial, which indicates a failure of the cultural myth about the conflicts between reestablished traditional femininity and modern femininity. In the story of happiness, the commercial successfully constructed a myth of the conflicts between collectivism and individualism as the respondents recognized and juxtaposed two versions of happiness presented by the commercial. However, it failed again when it started to adopt the notion of collectivism, which the respondents are against. In the marriage story, the respondents identified with and naturalized the women's view of marriage in the commercial, which suggests a success of cultural myth that represents the conflicts between the cultural meanings of patriarchal family relations and equal family relations.

This chapter will further explore these findings by summarizing and discussing some common themes and particular implications of the three stories.

## **6.1. The respondents' postfeminist interpretations**

The three stories reveal "leftover women's" understanding of the self and the world. Although each story has its emphasis, back and forth review shows that they all follow the notion of postfeminist discourse.

In the first place, all stories highlight the importance of women's material conditions. The bachelordom story indicates that women with good income can live a high-quality life without relying on men. In the happiness story, the respondents criticized parents' overestimation of women's dependence on man arguing that women with good material conditions have the

ability to take good care of themselves. In the last story, the marriage story, the respondents regarded women's income as a source of power for them to pick outstanding spouses. The underlying assumption of the emphasis of women's material conditions is that only women with good material conditions are empowered to select their lifestyles. Such discourse is an extension of the bodily property in postfeminist discourse and it fits perfectly into the postfeminist notion of individualism, choice, and empowerment.

The postfeminists' preoccupation with women's bodies suggests that women's bodies are sources of women's power (Gill, 2007). Such preoccupation has been extended to women's material conditions in this study indicating that being beautiful and sexy is not enough. Except for good appearances and figures, women should also have a high income to gain control of their lives. Indeed, the respondent Wanda also commented on one woman in the commercial that she was not excellent enough to have such high criteria for marriage. In this sense, women are autonomous agents with the freedom to make choices only if they have good material conditions. The emphasis on material conditions and personal choice seems encouraging at the first glance, but it actually enhances the standard of freedom and attributes all the responsibilities of the unpleasant situations "leftover women" face in society to women themselves.

The emphasis on material conditions and personal choice also leads to Chinese female consumers' intensified and extensified self-discipline. In the bachelordom story, the respondent Wanda show her disagreement with the miserable women depicted by the commercial saying that "leftover women" should be truly happy. This is a typical example of internal self-discipline that women should not show inner fragile but should always be positive and confident. In the marriage story, the respondent Luna mentioned the cost and gain of marriage implying that women's criteria of marriage have also become a form of self-discipline as it is a way for them to continuously pursue self-development. However, she also admitted that her criteria are hardly achieved idealizations of marriage and also the cause of her bachelordom. In this sense, she again attributed the responsibility of being left over to women themselves because they are not willing to make do with any man.

The entanglement of the discourse of women's material conditions and personal choice and the discourse of women's self-discipline also explains why a narcissistic gaze and a self-deprecating expression simultaneously appear in the respondents' narrative. On the one hand, the respondents obtain a sense of confidence and satisfaction by implementing the power they gain from material conditions. On the other hand, they are under increasingly intensive self-



discipline, which makes them feel they are never good enough and remain modest to the achievement they have made.

## **6.2. Potentials of increasing misogyny**

The rise of femvertising is a tendency of popular feminism, which is often accompanied by popular misogyny, namely the hostile challenges or rejoinder of women empowerment discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The internet era is an era of “eyeball economic” when visibility, such as views, click, and “likes” on social media, plays an important role on many aspects of social life (Banet-Weiser, 2018). As such, different discourses need to compete for visibility in the contemporary media landscape (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The popularization of femvertising has attracted a great amount of visibility from other discourses and broke the existing status quo between different discourses in society (Banet-Weiser, 2018). For the advocates of other discourses, especially the once and presently dominated discourse with opposite notions, the wide acceptance of feminism becomes a threat that stimulates fear, resistance, and aggression (Banet-Wiser, 2018).

In this study, it is obvious that the respondents’ interpretations of the commercial show a deviation from the patriarchal culture, including traditional femininity, collectivism, and patriarchal family relations. The respondents’ critical readings of those patriarchal culture implying the potential failure of these discourses in the competitions of visibility. Hence, the rise of femvertising may stimulate revolt from supporters of these discourses. In addition, the influence of women empowerment discourse is not limited to women. In the happiness and marriage story, we can see the pressure the women empowerment discourse exerts on other groups, including parents and men. In the happiness story, parents are under great pressure because of the marriage choice their daughters have made. In the marriage story, women’s self-discipline is conducted in the form of high criteria of their spouses. Hence, the findings of this study also suggest the tendency of increasing misogyny as a reaction to the rise of femvertising. As organizations have to deal with various stakeholders, it is necessary to take misogyny into considerations when studying and employing women empowering discourse in organizations’ internal and external communication.

## **6.3. Critical readings of the commercial: disempowering femvertising or empowering femvertising**

The analysis also shows a pattern of female consumers' critical interpretations of femvertising. The marriage story is the only story in which the respondents use naturalizing interpretation, namely they share the understanding of marriage with the women in the commercial and see it as the natural order of marriage. In two other stories, problematizing interpretations are conducted through the respondents' critiques of the traditional femininity and collectivism, which they think are not in line with their accepted cultural meanings, namely modern femininity and individualism, and need to be corrected. The reason behind the problematization is the failure of the brand to create cultural myths that reflect target consumers' anxieties and desired identities. In this study, the failure mainly results from the commercial's adaptation of the cultural meanings consumers hope to get away from. Especially, in bachelordom and happiness stories, the respondents expressed their disagreement with the traditional femininity and collectivism embedded in the commercial.

The problematization of femvertising does not mean that it fails to stimulate consumers' meaning-making and identity negotiation process. Rather, according to the countervailing cultural meanings model, problematization is also a way of interpretive use of the "leftover women" discourse in the commercial. Consumers' oppositional and resistant readings are the outcome of juxtapositions and combinations of countervailing discourses of femininity, collectivism and individualism and family relations in the society. By articulating their disagreement of traditional femininity, collectivism and patriarchal family relations, the respondents positioned them in an opposite position to these discourses and make it clear that their desired identities are to adopt modern femininity, individualism and equal family relations. By doing this, they negotiate their identity by referring to others (Buckingham, 1993; Ritson & Elliott, 1999). In this sense, they made use of the identity conflicts among various "leftover women" discourses to produce a personalized sense of "leftover women". At the same time, the respondents' contextualized use of the cultural meanings also enable their participation in constructing the image of "leftover women" in Chinese society, for example, the respondents use their blind dating experience as a reference to articulate their understanding of marriage. In general, the problematization interpretations of the commercial are not independent of the commercial. Rather, by positioning themselves in the society through referring to something they are against to and by contextualized interpret the commercial, the critical readings of the commercial contribute to the respondents' meaning-making and identity negotiation process. From this aspect, the femvertising is not disempowering because of the audience's problematization. Instead, it is where its empowerment nature lies in.

In addition, consumers' critical interpretations of the commercial also indicate that the once-dominant discourse of "leftover women" that women should get married at a marriageable age is no longer the only dominant discourse in Chinese society. Although it is still occupying mainstream media, there are already various discourses about women and their marriage choice, which provide Chinese women with countervailing interpretive standpoints to understand their identity as "leftover women" in Chinese society.

#### **6.4. The contradictions between the findings and the commercial's business success**

The findings of this study show that the commercial does not successfully create cultural myths to represent the conflicts the respondents are in the face of. At least in the first two stories, the respondents problematized the bachelordom and happiness discourses in the commercial. It seems contradicts to the business success of the commercial that it got millions of thousand of visibility in social media and brought sales increase for SK-II. Although the main focus of this study is not to explain the commercial's success in practice, this section will try to dismantle the contradictions based on the empirical material and theories at hand.

To begin with, the lives of "leftover women" are so diverse that the qualitative method employed by this study are not able to cover all of them. The strength of the qualitative method is to provide an interpretative understanding of a certain social phenomenon, which usually from a small scale. However, as one respondent articulated, we should be aware that there are not only one type of "leftover women":

Haley (1992): There is no fixed image of "leftover women". Indeed, in the past I was impacted by media thinking "leftover women" were very miserable or simply thinking they were very cool .... However, life is full of variety. "Leftover women" have diverse ways of life.

Actually, "leftover women" is a government constructed term used to cover women who are still single in the age of 25 or older. The aim of creating this term is to increase the marriage rate in China (Fincher, 2014) rather than to formulate a concept that covers all unmarried women's life status. The same goes for this study. Although we identified three stories in all respondents' narratives, there are still differences among them and more stories left to be discovered. Therefore, it is risky to regard the stories constructed in this study as the final

conclusions of Chinese female consumers' lives It is important to embrace the diversity of "leftover women's" stories rather than to simplify them into a flat-pack image.

In addition, it is also important to distinguish the difference between viral branding and cultural branding. The viral branding attaches great importance to the public influence seeing consumers as the major creator of the identity values (Holt, 2004). In this sense, the task of the brand is to seed brands with target customers for them to develop brand's value (Holt, 2004). However, in order to create a brand embedded with identity values, the brand has to instill the identity value into their product through communication so that the consumers can experience the stories the brand told when consuming the product (Holt, 2004). To conclude, identity brand can be created through a viral approach but viral branding does not necessary construct an identity brand. In this sense, although the commercial has successfully gone viral on social media, it says little about whether the brand successfully creates cultural myths or not.

# Chapter 7 Conclusions

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This chapter concluded the findings and discussions of this study. It also discussed how the findings of this study could contribute to literature and practice. The suggestions for future research are also presented.

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The current study identifies three stories in consumers' interpretation of SK-II's commercial: bachelordom, happiness, and marriage. Each story represents a conflict between the respondents' personal identity and social identity. Three pairs of major countervailing cultural meanings embedded in the three stories are established traditional femininity and modern femininity, collectivism and individualism, and patriarchal family relations and equal family relations. The latter one in each pair is the respondents' desired identity. In general, the respondents interpreted femvertising in postfeminist discourse with a specific focus on women's material conditions, personal choice and self-discipline. Material conditions are regarded as women's source of power, which is an extension of postfeminism's focus on women's bodies and has resulted in women's intensive psychological self-discipline. The findings also reveal a potential tendency of increasing misogyny as a reaction from advocates of opposite discourses and people who are under great pressure because of the popular feminism. This study also indicates that the respondents made critical readings of the commercial. In this sense, the respondents negotiate their identity as "leftover women" in Chinese society by referring to views they disagree with. The respondents' problematization of the commercial also shows a contradiction to the commercial's business success. In order to understand the contradiction, we should be aware of both the diversity of the life of women labeled as "leftover women" and the difference between viral branding and cultural branding.

In a nutshell, this study provides a unique consumers' perspective on femvertising studies by discovering consumers postfeminist and critical interpretations of femvertising. It also contributes to postfeminist studies by identifying a new emphasis on material conditions and verified women's intensive psychological self-discipline. By studying female consumers in China, this research also adds a third-world-country lens for Western-centric postfeminist studies. As Fincher (2014) pointed out, women in many other countries are also facing great pressure to marry. The stigmatization of single women is not the problem only Chinese women are struggling with. Hence, the findings of this study can also provide a reference for scholars

and practitioners who are interested in femvertising, female consumers or postfeminist discourses in those countries.

The implications for future research are to shift gaze from female empowerment discourse and female roles in femvertising to study how the confrontational discourses or nonfemale characters are formulated in femvertising, how nonfemale audience attach meanings to femvertising, and how femvertising is used by misogynists in their reactions to popular feminism. For practitioners, the pressure postfeminist discourses put on man opens up opportunities for man empowerment advertising. The tendency of increasing misogyny should also be taken into consideration when planning organizations' female empowerment communication strategies. The second suggestion is based on the findings that the contradictions between the findings of this study and the commercial's success in practice. Although this study tries to address the inconsistency by drawing from the findings and theories, it is a tentative explanation that needs further studies. Hence, quantitative studies are suggested to study a greater number of female consumers to examine what factors influence consumers' sharing and purchasing intent. Finally, this study also reveals the diversity of "leftover women". Therefore, quantitative studies can be conducted to study segments in Chinese female consumers.

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# Appendix

## Appendix I: Recruiting poster

**招募令**

毕业论文研究 **受采访者**

25岁及以上 城市未婚女性 学生/工作/创业

[ 采访约1小时/远程视频采访/可匿名/时间随你方便/有小礼物or红包 ]

.....

研究内容涉及对广告中女性形象的看法及当前女性婚恋观等，没有对错，只记录真实想法。

如果你符合条件并感兴趣，或有合适的受访者推荐，请联系林小姐：595385219 (微信) 或扫二维码，备注“受访者”。感谢不尽!





## Appendix 2: SK-II's commercial

Initial video address: [https://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XMTUyNTA1MTg1Ng==.html](https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMTUyNTA1MTg1Ng==.html)

Video with English subtitles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2R9xOCD5xA>



### Appendix 3: List of informants

	Informants	Year of Birth	City	Profession
1	Yolande	1991	Xiamen	Marketing
2	Queenie	1994	Sweden	Dancing
3	Callie	1994	Dongguan	Education
4	Babette	1991	Jiangmen	Land Planning
5	Camilla	1992	Xi'an	Student
6	Carole	1991	Guangzhou	Marketing
7	Paige	1992	Beijing	Filming
8	Sallie	1992	Shenzhen	Marketing
9	Kali	1994	Guangzhou	Marketing
10	Winnie	1988	Sweden	Student
11	Patricia	1988	Dujiangyan	Secretary
12	Ramona	1994	Guangzhou	Self-employed in the Educational Industry
13	Delia	1991	Sweden	Student
14	Wanda	1994	A City in Fujian Province	Unidentified
15	Eda	1988	Shanghai	Education
16	Haley	1992	Xiamen	Energy
17	Lana	1988	Shenzhen	Electronic design
18	Elena	1990	Shanghai	Law
19	Vera	1987	Beijing	TV industry
20	Abby	1990	Zhengzhou	TV industry
21	Belle	1987	Shenzhen	Catering industry

## **Appendix 4: Interview Guideline**

### **1. Meaning-making**

- 1.1. Can you describe the young women in this video? How do you think about them? (For example, their role as professionals and daughter)
- 1.2. Can you describe the young women's parents in this video? How do you think about them?
- 1.3. Do you like the solution provided by this commercial? Do you think this commercial will help to improve women's situation in Chinese society?

### **2. Identity Construction**

- 2.2. Are you aware that this is an advertisement? What do you think of the commercial in general?
- 2.3. Will you do something in response to this commercial? For example, share it within your social network or talk with parents about this issue? Why or why not?
- 2.4. How do you think about brands that try to empower women in their advertising? Will you consider this when doing shopping? Why or why not? In this case, will you buy SK-II's products after seeing this commercial?
- 2.5. Do you know any friend who bought SK-II or their brands' products because of the women empowered advertising these brands made? How do you think about their consumption behaviors?

### **3. Socially Situated Factors**

- **Personal/Social History**

- 3.1. Do you have similar problems in your daily life? Have you been called "leftover women"? What do you think about the term "leftover women"?
- 3.2. Have you discussed the "leftover women" issues with your parents? Why and why not? Can you tell me about one discussion you have with your parents? What in general do you discuss about "leftover women"?
- 3.3. Have you participated in blind dating activities before? If yes, can you tell me about your experience (Did you actively participate in such activities or others force you to do so? How do you feel about such experience?)

- **Lifestyle Preferences**

3.4. Have you considered getting married? What do you think is the ideal situation when you will decide to get married?

3.5. Tell me about “the good life”. What kind of life do you want to live in the future? Why?

3.6. Describe a compliment you have recently received. What made it special?

- **Life Goals & Themes**

3.7. What does your age mean to you?

3.8. Tell me about how your life might be different if you were a man.

3.9. Describe your role model. Describe a friend who is a role model for you.

3.10. What do you want to be in the future regardless of any time, money or energy limitation?

- **Localized Frames of Reference**

3.11. Do you know any friends who are also urged to get married? Have you discussed this issue with them? What do they think?

- **Material Conditions of Everyday Life**

3.12. How often have you been shopping in the past month? Online or offline? You usually do shopping alone or with others? Is shopping a leisure activity or a task for you?

3.13. What is the most favorite thing you bought recently? Why? How do you buy it?

#### **4. Reflection**

4.1. Reflection on your experience in taking part in this study