Victoria's Secret Goes to China: Femvertising and the Failed Promise of Empowerment

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As the largest US lingerie retailer, Victoria's Secret is known for promoting a version of 'sexy' hyper-femininity. Victoria's Secret was founded by Roy Raymond in 1977, galvanised by the idea to set up a store where men felt comfortable shopping for lingerie for women.[1] The brand was sold to Leslie Herbert Wexner in 1982 and then VS became a lingerie powerhouse. VS's success did not last. The company's stock price has dropped sharply since 2015 and the annual fashion show was suspended in 2019.[2] Reacting to recessionary pressures, Victoria's Secret started to craft a new, confident and globalised version of femininity by expanding its criteria for lingerie model recruitment, especially in relation to race and ethnicity, sexuality and age. Models who are not in line with the previous tyranny of ideal beauty and those with more racial and cultural particularities have been employed on stage, reflecting Victoria's Secret's utilisation of femvertising to appeal to an equally wide range of consumers. Since 2016, there has also been a proliferation of traditional Chinese cultural symbols,

such as Peking Opera costume, applied by VS, and increasing numbers of Chinese models walking for the brand, generating a discordant response in nationalists while also being accused of cultural appropriation in the Chinese media sphere.

In recent years, a growing body of feminist and advertising scholarship is concerned with femvertising, understood as a practice combining female empowerment with advertising that strategically appropriates feminist values and utilises positive and pro-female messages, questions stereotypical views of women and sells anger about sexism.[3] Targeting exclusively women, femvertising effectively builds and maintains a quasi-friendship relationship with its female customers, for example by enacting empathy with their insecurities. Femvertising accentuates empowering messages and encourages women to confidently believe in themselves and take positive control of their bodies and lives. In this chapter, femvertising thus refers to a manipulative advertising practice, primarily employed by international brands. They appropriate the buzz of feminism and utilise the insecurities of certain groups, and merchandise inspirational and affirmative messages to potential customers to sell products.

Discourses of 'porno chic' and 'striptease' culture have made the sexualisation of culture influential and normalised.[4] Women are sexually displayed in mass media – women's magazines, chick lit and commercial advertising. To some extent, they are sexualised by men and by themselves, simultaneously. Femvertising has updated the sexualisation of culture from the critique of objectification to a sanguine celebration of female sexiness. Following the transnational #MeToo movement popularised in 2017, feminism has flourished and become popular and more accessible in different areas, ranging from celebrities' speech and digital activism to commodities. Feminism is enjoying increased 'economies of visibility' via corporate-friendly and media-friendly expressions in a context of capitalist marketability.[5] In these circumstances, femvertising has come to prominence as brands desire to get in on some of the energy and cultural buzz of feminism. Femvertising reflects an epistemological transformation in the construction of gender and femininity in postfeminist media culture. Femvertising exercises an intersectional and decentralised approach while representing the 'otherness' by incorporating contemporary activism into neoliberal consumer culture.

In this chapter, the Victoria's Secret brand is used to examine the femvertising strategy adopted by advertisers concerning commercialised forms

of sexiness, inclusiveness, and diversity, and its current strategy of appealing to Chinese customers. Research questions are:

1. How does Victoria's Secret femvertising appropriate feminist values and female empowerment rhetoric to encourage brand consumption?
2. What are the implications of femvertising for racial and cultural issues when traversing Anglo-American contexts to China?

To address above questions, media output of VS which contain female empowerment messages mainly targeted the younger generation of Chinese female customers from 2016 to 2020 were collected. These include images of Chinese models and traditional Chinese cultural symbols in VS fashion shows in 2016, 2017, and 2018;[6] commercials showing 'plus-size' models from VS-related websites; and VS *This is sexy* campaign showing Chinese models and celebrities redefined female sexiness.

These samples, all of which explicitly focus on femvertising, are the data corpus. I adopted discourse analysis, focusing on the constructions of femininities and sexiness in the texts, and visual analysis, focusing on the visual images of models and related cultural symbolism. I adopt a critical lens that pays attention to gender, race, and commodification processes and explore how Chinese-related items were selected and organised by VS to craft a version of Chineseness and to further enhance the brand's popularity in China. How does VS appropriate the Chinese aesthetic of female beauty in a West-dominated stage? What kind of female gendered subjectivity does VS want to promote via femvertising? How should the power relations pursued within the field of femvertising associated with gender and race be viewed?

Examining the case study of Victoria's Secret's entry to the Chinese market amid a construction of gendered, racialised and nationally-located femininity, this chapter shows not only how a particular type of sexually-empowered female subject is constructed or appropriated by the brand, but also brings a critical race perspective to understand the marketing strategy. I seek to contribute to literature about how femvertising is implicated in international circulation and trafficking of images of women and the feminist movement in order – strategically – to appeal to customers outside Anglo-American contexts. I look specifically at three tropes – the use of hyper-white yet visibly Chinese models, the selective appropriation of Chinese imagery, and the distinctive tone of the Chinese *This Is Sexy* campaign.

Postfeminism Within and Outside China

Since the early 1980s,[7] postfeminism has gradually become the buzzword for describing the social and cultural climate in the English-speaking world within which young women no longer call themselves 'feminist' since they have been the beneficiaries of the old battles that the previous generation fought.[8] Feminist activism is deemed unnecessary and thus negated. Postfeminism captures something that is going on beyond the terms of pro-feminist versus anti-feminist – combining attitudes towards feminism's past with the transformation of sex-positive femininity into popular culture – than 'the more familiar framing concept of "backlash"' of second-wave feminism.[9] Postfeminist culture is based on the rejection and neglect of gender inequality and notions asserting that efforts to promote gender equality have become 'a spent force'.[10] Under the banner of empowerment, women are encouraged to believe that they are now 'empowered' and hence are positively incited to embrace the commercialised forms of femininity and celebrate seemingly autonomous pleasure through consumer engagement.[11] The commercialised forms of sexuality and assertions of 'girl power' or 'grrrl style' are central to postfeminist narratives.[12]

The ostensible empowerment is based on consumer behaviour and lifestyle choice.[13] Changing attitudes around the sexualisation of women in the second wave and the postfeminist era demonstrate the dynamics of sexuality and gender relations. In 1968, women organised the Miss America Protest to respond to the 'beauty' pageant and the antiquated and misogynistic attitudes towards women. Protesters discarded bras, makeup, and girdles to a 'freedom trash can' to show their refusal to being doubly victimised through their construction as sexual objects and as compulsorily heterosexual ones. In postfeminist media culture, contemporary women self-identify as powerful agents and are invited to be represented in a seemingly objectified manner indicating that they can 'play with power taking it on and off at will'.[14] As a quote from the film *Crazy, Stupid, Love* suggests, 'The war between the sexes is over. We won – okay? We won the second women started doing pole dancing for exercise'.[15]

Rosalind Gill's notion of 'postfeminist sensibility' opens up a heuristic approach to construe the commercialised femininity in media representation.[16] Understanding postfeminism as a sensibility highlights postfeminism as 'a circulating set of ideas, images and meanings' and provides a more open psychologic approach to explore affect and psychological

construction in popular culture.[17] It also shows that the sentiment of post-feminism has the potential to break through the constraint of geographical specific locations and is not exclusive to the 'white and middle class by default'.[18] Likewise, Joel Gwynne suggests that postfeminism as a cultural sensibility operates more commonly in economically prosperous neoliberal countries.[19] Simidele Dosekun understands post-feminism as 'a transnational circulating culture' so that exploring post-feminism in the global South is seen as 'making a deliberate and theoretically grounded assertion about globalisation, neoliberalism, and their cultural contradictions'.[20] This perspective has enormous cultural resonance and reflects popular sentiments about gender and femininity across borders. It offers a rationale and a theoretical basis for exploring the sexually empowered version of femininity in a transnational context as the international brand Victoria's Secret travels from America to China.

In China, feminism has not gone through the same stages as those documented in Western feminist literature. Within the global traffic of postfeminism with its common issues but different contexts, China represents a complex battlefield where the amalgam of feminism and anti-feminism, 'pseudo-feminism', and the stigma of feminism are battling it out with competing voices. Feminism in China has followed a distinct pathway from socialist state feminism to a hyper-femininity, consumer-driven, and empowered version of post state feminism.[21]

In Maoist China (1949–1976), women's liberation was associated with a top-down movement promulgated by the socialist state, rather than autonomous and participatory grassroots activism.[22] Drawing on the key message that 'times have changed – men and women are equal', state feminism championed the idea of gender parity and coined a neologism 'half the sky' referring to women and women's contribution to nation building[23] (i.e. feudal oppression was in the past and women were now able to 'hold up half the sky'). State feminism's emphasis on women's participation in productive labour also allowed women not to be restricted to the domestic realm. The androgynous 'iron girl' working in traditionally masculine fields such as heavy machinery was the representative female image back then.[24] In the post-socialist era, the move from a centrally planned economy to a market transition is proved indispensable in refashioning concepts of femininity through 'a strategic use of the essentialism of the gender binary'.[25] Post-socialist China has managed to combine neoliberal governmentality with the state-manipulated market economy in order to cooperate in tandem with the influx of global capital.

Post-socialist China emphasises consumerism, individualism, and cosmopolitan subjectivities, implying a disjuncture with the highly politicised and collectivistic socialist era.[26] Femininity is then characterised as womanly, beautiful, sexual, and hedonist. The emerging middle-class young women who own the consumerist agency and value personal gratification and aspirations become subjects of the globalised, glamorous, sexy, and empowered post state feminism. Implicitly they are also the targets of VS femvertising campaigns.

Unpacking Modelling in Femvertising: Docile Bodies?

One of the main characteristics of femvertising is the reconfiguration of female bodies. Brands now have access to a range of depictions of what is attractive. Femvertising echoes the body positivity movement in social media, which involves divergence from the restrictive body ideals and encourages more representations of women with diverse body sizes, ages, and ethnicities. The origin of the body positivity movement can be traced back to second-wave feminism's resistance to the discrimination against fat bodies.[27]

In postfeminist media culture, women's experience with sexualisation has been bound up with self-pleasing autonomy. Femvertising advertisements propagate the notion of 'me-first' and self-empowerment by recruiting female models who do not fit in to the narrow standards of sexual appeal by positioning them in sanguine forms of bodily exhibition. This happens gradually in underwear advertisements. For example, the Chinese lingerie brand NEIWAI launches 'No body is nobody' campaign, inviting a group of ordinary women to share their changing ideas of physical scars, body shaming, skin tone, and aging. The campaign highlights not only women's self-acceptance and self-affirmation, but also the solidarity and sisterhood among women – all of which a contemporary woman should possess. Femvertising has transformed the advertising ideology from implying women as 'raw material' for men's sexual imagery to underlining women's self-consciousness as independent individuals whose power and pleasure are stitched with confidently bodily display and sexual explicitness.[28] Femvertising is eager to define femininity in a more contemporary sense that centres the female body, affect, and women's psychological construction.

Invoking a Foucauldian term, models in neoliberal capitalism can be seen as possessing a 'docile body'.[29] Awareness of the permanent visibility of the docile body assures the automatic functioning of power. Referring power operates not in terms of coercion but through constructing and normalising a certain kind of subjectivity. 'The body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved'.[30] Lingerie models' gender performance reflects ways of 'doing gender' with imperatives of the feminine ideal although the ideal is constantly evolving.[31] The way power acts has shifted from depicting women as docile bodies through the external male gaze to constructing women as autonomous individuals who are capable of making the right choice through an internalised narcissistic gaze.[32] In femvertising, can the representation of hyper-femininity be seen as 'women's success' or as retro-sexism in the era of postfeminism?

Regarding models as 'docile bodies' is neither to deny their agency or autonomy as independent beings nor simplifying their subjectivities associated largely with their bodies. There is always a dichotomy of oppression/empowerment when describing the relationship between beauty norms and the female body. Toni Ingram suggests that beauty and the feminine body are 'separate entities where beauty norms work to constrain, objectify or empower the feminine subject'.[33] To understand the ways in which femvertising positions and represents female bodies, we need to consider both its content and the process or logic behind such commodification.

Nowadays brands promoting body appreciation and acceptance are more likely to be favoured by female customers. However, the celebration of female sexual agency with a distorted idea of freedom is problematic in femvertising. According to Hirshman, the concept of freedom is based on an individual level whereas 'oppression acts across classes of people in ways that uniformly limit the possibilities of choice and action for individuals within the class'.[34] Women's decisions to embrace the commodity-driven femininity as individual and free choices cannot be accepted in isolation without considering the whole landscape of gender relations or women's economic conditions. Ideals of empowerment and freedom are carefully wrapped up in sex-positive postfeminist rhetoric. For lingerie models, women's value and career success are relentlessly bound up with how much they are seen as sexually alluring or confidently empowered. As Banet-Weiser points out, the main distinction between postfeminism and second wave feminist politics is the 'focus on female individualism and individual empowerment'.[35]

Femvertising falls into a trap of quasi-progress especially when it meets the intersectionality of class, sexuality, race and ethnicity even when it permits more inclusiveness than previously. The question is who is capable of being empowered and who has been made invisible. The role of a model is to prioritise women's sexual attractiveness and encourage a self-determining confident mindset. The sexualisation of models is deemed to be a path to their empowerment. Provided with few choices, there is no space for women but to fall into line. The very notion of individualism should take into account individual's preferences and allow greater diversity. To make it broader, as Butler suggests, 'the point was not to prescribe a new gendered way of life that might then serve as a model for readers. Rather, the aim was to open up the field of possibilities for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realised'.[36] In the next section, lingerie models of Chinese heritage in VS will be analysed.

Chinese Models and Whiteness Debates

Since a postfeminist sensibility incorporates consumerism with the commodification of difference, how does femvertising advertisements selectively use racial and cultural diversity when they are promoting a sexually empowered version of femininity? Some have argued that postfeminism reinforces existing power relations and reproduces inequality as postfeminist discourses function as mechanisms of power and exclusion.[37] Researchers who have examined the racialised character of contemporary media and popular culture claim that postfeminism works to reproduce racial inequality by reinstituting (Western) whiteness as the dominant norm.[38] In this section, I explicate how femvertising marks a racialised modernisation of femininity that re-centres whiteness by describing representations of Chinese models in Victoria's Secret.

Liu Wen and He Sui are the first two models of Chinese ethnicity walking for VS. Liu Wen is characterised by her Asian appearance – beige skin and slender eyes. He Sui's features fit with an idealised whiteness as seen by her pale, flawless skin, as well as deep-set eyes with double-fold eyelids (see Fig. 2.1). On the runway of VS, He Sui was decorated in very feminine ways – an innocent fairy seemingly unaware of the sexual cue she conveys and a luscious lady commanding the postfeminist 'girl power'. Chinese media gave He Sui an approving sobriquet 'Xiangu' meaning 'fairy' being in favour of her idealised whiteness and slender female body which are key elements of her celebrity persona. They in turn bring her

Fig. 2.1 Chinese model He Sui (third on the right) at VS show, 2018

many lucrative opportunities. Nevertheless, He Sui's idealised whiteness is relatively unattainable for the majority of the Chinese public. To obtain and maintain such pale and immaculate skin demands 'aesthetic labour' which is a costly undertaking.[39] It not only requires time, consumer spending, painful injections and constant scrutiny, but also the hard graft involved should be invisible.[40]

Whiteness or the pale skin tone in China is an embodiment of the social, cultural and economic process, with an explicit connection with femininity. In Maoist era, the 'iron girl' is identifiable by her bronze skin tone, associated with being working-class, a prominent and valued association within conventional socialist ideology. During the transformation of Chinese socialism, China pursues an alternative path towards modernity which cannot be achieved without a corresponding shift in class relations.[41] In post-socialist China, the preference for the pale skin tone intersects with the long-standing preferable aesthetic of female beauty,[42] the increasing influence of Western commodity capitalism, and expectations

for women to be skilled make-up and technical masters. In addition, in the Chinese language, there is a dichotomy between expressions of whiteness and beige skin tone, where 'whiteness' refers to the pale skin tone while 'black' describes the beige tone. There is no appropriate or widely used word to describe beige skin tone. Whilst there has been a trend in Chinese social media promulgating the tanned skin, the preference for whiteness remains mainstream and dominant. This is illustrated by the popularity of whitening cosmetics and surgery in East Asian countries. Sun-tanned skin in the West is a symbol of fitness and beauty evoking images of holiday, while in East Asia dark skin largely implies working-class identity involved in excessive physical work.[43]

The representation of He Sui partly manifests the 'post-feminist masquerade'[44] and a 'nostalgia for whiteness' in Western media.[45] The post-feminist masquerade refers to 'a mask of feminine submissiveness'.[46] It works as a knowing and self-chosen strategy for women to return to traditional modes of patriarchal authority. Thereby, women, and models in particular, find their reasons for wearing spindly stilettos which no longer means an oppressive force to them since it has been wrapped in a 'choice' rhetoric rather than an obligation and femininity has become a substitute authority.[47] The post-feminist masquerade is highly visible across the commercial media field and gives the green light to 'a nostalgic and light-hearted refrain of femininity'. McRobbie also argues that the resumption of whiteness is a de-ethnicised process since 'dominant feminine-whiteness becomes an invisible means of rolling back on anti-racism'.[48] In recent years, representations of whiteness as well as white models dominate Chinese shopping websites. In her writing about global chick lit and Chinese young urban women, Eva Chen argues that what the global chick lit propagates is not limited to 'Western-defined and locally endorsed values of beauty and femininity', but the idea of neoliberal and empowered women who feel pleasure and freedom through 'consumption and progress in following Western commodities and values'.[49] To some extent, the de-ethnicised mechanism of the nostalgia for whiteness chimes with the de-politicised process of postfeminist media culture as racial and sexual discrimination have both been silenced and made invisible.

Apart from the social and cultural understanding of whiteness in China, and the nostalgia for whiteness in Western media culture, whiteness is also related to the mode of 'glossiness' in the visual media industry. Mehita Iqani uses the concept of 'glossiness' to refer to a variety of communication practices in which 'smooth, shiny, seamless textures' are applied in the

construction of meanings of flawlessness.[50] 'The presence of glossiness in commercial imagery indicates a realm of fantasised perfection'. In the media industry, the glossiness mode co-exists with the discourse of consumerism, and the former contributes to the power of the latter.[51] With the help of airbrushing techniques, the glossiness mode has become a routine in the visual industry. Meanwhile, the amount of work required to create ideal images is also invisible to consumers. Representations of He Sui personify the mechanics of glossiness in terms of her idealised whiteness and thus encourage a form of active engagement with the viewers. Hyperreal images of He Sui signify a sense of perfection to which customers (mainly Chinese females) are invited to aspire and secure access to. In this sense, women who fall into the trap are still fearful subjects, driven by the consumption and pursuit of 'complete perfection'.[52]

The Visibility of Chineseness and Cultural Appropriation

In post-socialist China, the representation of gender is partly guided by a combination of 'Western modernity and Chinese "traditionality"'.[53] After the 2016 VS lingerie show, the brand was accused of cultural appropriation by Chinese media as a result of the segment 'Road Ahead' that drew inspiration from Chinese culture. The accusation of cultural appropriation illustrates a divergence in tastes and judgements across cultures. Besides, audiences tend to find cultural products with high cultural specificity less appealing and difficult to identify with because of the lack of contextual and background knowledge.[54] Modifying dragon and Peking Opera costume imagery to skimpy lingerie looks manifests the collision and fusion of traditional Chinese culture with the sexualisation of culture in the West (see Fig. 2.2). Lingerie cannot be considered a fitting tribute to the more reserved and conservative context of traditional Chinese culture. Notions of individualism and self-empowerment in the postfeminist media culture conflict with the collective values emphasised and promoted in Peking Opera. Furthermore, 2016 was the first year that four Chinese models walked at VS fashion show. VS opened the first lingerie store in Shanghai in February 2017 and held the annual fashion show in Shanghai at the end of the same year. Victoria's Secret's strategies indicate an emergent trend that the Eurocentric fashion industry is bending to the tastes and rhythms of Chinese culture.

Fig. 2.2 Elsa Hosk is wrapped in a dragon at VS show, 2016

The global cultural economy is inundated with ambiguities, ironies, and tension when cultural commodities travel to distinct contexts outside their origins. In VS fashion show, the visibility of Chineseness reflects VS's tactic of making its products more attractive to its key audiences. Appadurai argues that in the late capitalism, 'pastiche and nostalgia are central modes' in the globalised image production and reception process.[55] VS represents an imagined visual world which is constituted by 'the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the world'.[56] The boundary between the real world – the global order and landscape – and the imagined landscape is blurred. The highly stereotyped interpretation of Chinese culture by VS helps viewers to construct their fantasies of China. In VS, racial unity becomes 'a purely aesthetic category'.[57] Models

from diverse racial and national backgrounds are all positioned in 'a formation of homogenous individuality' and are attached to identical aspirations and dreams – being confident and sexy.[58] It might be argued that this is simply what fashion shows do – creating a fantasy of femininity. But it is the racialised and ethno-nationalist specificities that VS offers that are so striking.

Representations of race and gender function as a form of 'cultural capital' as well as a mode of consumption aligning with the twofold 'postrace' and postfeminist media culture.[59] Banet-Weiser delineates that in the contemporary American media culture where there is a trend to incorporate non-white narratives in advertising and merchandise, since representations of race and ethnicity are marketed by media industries as 'cool, authentic, and urban'.[60] Race and gender have similarly been crafted as commodities. More importantly, lingerie models in VS, with diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, are all simultaneously constrained by the femvertising market constraints and benefited from the 'postfeminist sexual contract'.[61] Here we ask: has the sexually empowered female subjectivity become a globalised identity? Whether the commodification of female sexiness has been globalised? Within the discourse of 'commodification of otherness', authentic national culture becomes a spice used to liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.[62] Regardless of whether its lingerie design inspiration is Eastern or Western in origin, the commodification of difference is becoming globalised and consistent. More seriously, inspired by Gill and Kanai,[63] the inclusiveness of racial and cultural difference in femvertising moves the critique beyond simple notions of visibility/invisibility, since difference has been depoliticised to be represented.

Femvertising: From Bodily Property to Psychological Regulation

Since 2019, VS marketing demonstrates a shift towards using more down-to-earth and close-to-reality representations of models, reflected by the newer femvertising strategy of recruiting models who do not fit the traditional moulds and letting women redefine sexiness. In one VS advertisement entitled 'find the size for your perfect teddy', a 'plus-size' model Candice Huffine advises that most of VS teddies range in size from XXS to XXL. This shows that the era for exclusively slim models has gone and more inclusiveness and normalisation are welcomed.

The brand also launched a series of femvertising advertisement named *This Is Sexy*. They invited Chinese actresses and celebrities to redefine sexiness under the slogan of 'Break the norms and stereotype of sexiness. You can define sexiness'. Chinese actress Zhou Dongyu featured with her child-like face and slim body. In the commercial, she stated:

> I like myself and all my parents give me – my personality and my body. I think sexiness is a wonderful thing. I am not sexy in a traditional-defined way – not like the "S" [she lifts her hand to gesture an "S" in the air]. From my perspective, being sexy is feeling comfortable and not catering to the norm. Sexiness is naturally released. Now I feel I'm quite sexy. It's for us to define sexiness, rather than it defines us…Be the most comfortable self and be confident – this is sexiness.

Likewise, Chinese model He Sui also shared her opinion about sexiness:

> Sexiness is more like an attitude. Sexiness is what real life looks like. Why should I be perfect? It's good not to be perfect. I'm getting used to accepting my imperfections – this attitude is sexy. Of course, I don't want wrinkles. But when I have wrinkles, they are the trace of time – that's sexy.

These femvertising texts demonstrate progress in the way that the pressure to be beautiful is challenged by women and the 'realm of fantasised perfection' is abandoned.[64] However, femvertising images demonstrate little change from the cult of perfection era. If the audio track is removed from the video, the visual track can be applied to any advertising promoting the old-fashioned ideals of female beauty. Besides, postfeminist contradictions are also reflected in the femvertising strategy. Within a postfeminist sensibility, appeal to feminist politics has been muted and then transmuted into a more individual and sex-positive version. Female empowerment has been depoliticised and then closely connected to women's personal choices and the ability to consume, not to social or cultural structures. Femvertising has updated the notion of women's self-surveillance from the physical level to psychological regulation. Femvertising narratives offer women and girls a postfeminist mantra of how to think, feel, and live, with a particular focus on the issue of ethical standard. In an advertisement about diet and shape control, being on diet is tied to discourses of self-discipline and positively controlling one's life, while refusal to lose weight is encoded with self-abandonment and degradation.

Femvertising does not represent a straightforward departure from outdated, restrictive standards of female beauty. The femvertising narratives described above deliver ideas that being sexy is not restricted to the physical level and updates the definition of female sexiness to a new terrain of mental power, an ideology, and an attitude modification. Female sexiness is positioned and transfigured, by femvertising, as a commodity, a limited edition that is accessible only to those who can consume it. In Gill and Elias's words, 'no longer is it enough to work on and discipline the body, but in today's society the beautiful body must be accompanied by a beautiful mind, with suitably upgraded and modernised postfeminist attitudes to the self'.[65] In femvertising, being sexy is to *feel* you are sexy; is to parade your imperfections with a sense of 'realness'; is to be confident and believe you are irreplaceable. A female's sexiness is signalled by the display of her body with a positive and self-assured attitude. If this attitude is adopted, body sizes, ages, ethnic and class background are no longer obstacles on the road to individual sexiness. Women are required to work on and remake their subjectivities to stay positive and confident as femininity is not merely a physical property. Patriarchal and neoliberal governmentality has extended the territory from women's bodies to women's minds.

Conclusion

In this chapter, Victoria's Secret's most recent femvertising strategies have been examined while capturing the Chinese market via a specific construction of gendered, racialised, and nationally located femininity. Models of Chinese ethnicity and traditional Chinese cultural symbols were applied to contribute to apparent racial and cultural diversity. Victoria's Secret used relatively restricted ideas of Chineseness to be inclusive and compatible. This in turn was criticised as Orientalist interpretation and cultural appropriation deficient in contextual and historical knowledge. Besides, the shift towards hyper-white imagery marks a racialised modernisation of femininity. More recently, Victoria's Secret enlarges the potential scope of female sexiness and redefines sexiness as a form of positive, confident, and self-assured attitude. Femvertising by Victoria's Secret has transformed female sexiness into a commodity that is available only to those able to consume it. This shift has updated the neoliberal governmentality from disciplining women's bodies to regulating women's psychological life.

Situating femvertising into the postfeminist media culture, I have argued that discourses of women's empowerment and liberation are

closely linked to their rates of consumption, psychological strength, and individual attitude. Women are invited to positively believe that they are empowered, thus it is their free will to choose what time to be feminine and what time to be ambitious. Concepts of individualism, self-empowerment, and personal choice – all in a depoliticised rhetoric – imply the retreat of gender politics from the political and collective endeavour. On the stage of Victoria's Secret fashion shows, models with racial and cultural particularities are celebrating the same – yet different – version of femininity and are attached to identical aspirations. Femvertising has been found to reinforce existing power relations and reproduce inequalities by commodifying racial and cultural difference and making it shallow and depoliticised.

Where is the dividing line separating the empowered from the powerful? Contemporary women are endowed with consumer agency thus they are incited to empower themselves via consuming. A plethora of female agency discourses in femvertising has distorted the real meaning of agency, which lies with the producer and associated elements that constitute production, rather than the consumer.[66] For Chinese women, if embracing a Western version of hyper-femininity signifies an imperative path towards modernisation, cosmopolitan, and female emancipation, where should Chinese female gendered subjectivity be located within the collision and fusion of cultures? More media reception studies on the emerging and distinctive Chinese postfeminist sensibilities are required to answer this question.

Finally, in femvertising, not only have structural differences been attached to aesthetic meaning, the potential threat to women has also been made invisible. We are witnessing a popular culture of commercial femininity, wondering how empowering it is for young women to 'flash' their breasts on the runway.[67] Returning to the question raised at the beginning of this chapter – Can the representation of hyper-femininity be seen as 'women's success' or as retro-sexism in the era of postfeminism, in February 2020, a report entitled 'Angels in Hell: The Culture of Misogyny Inside Victoria's Secret' in *The New York Times* revealed the entrenched culture of misogyny, bullying and harassment of models and employees in Victoria's Secret. Witnesses to the sexual harassment advised that 'the abuse was just laughed off and accepted as normal. It was almost like brainwashing'.[68] Victoria's Secret annual lingerie show used to be a cultural spectacle and a big hit, whereas it has been suspended since 2019. Is

hyper-femininity along with the stereotypical male fantasy being anachronistic? Thus, a more 'authentic' and normalised display of femininity is gaining global popularity. I conclude that actions of femvertising are used to construct a carefully packaged form of commercialised sexiness, as Victoria's Secret enters China.

Notes

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5. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018): 21.
6. No VS fashion shows have taken place since 2019, so there is no available data after 2018.

7. The term 'postfeminism' was first used in Susan Bolotin's article 'Voices from the Post-feminist Generation' in *New York Times* on 17th October 1982. Postfeminism was used to refer to a new kind of politics which was about feminism but repudiating the anger and resentment associated with feminism.
8. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (London: Sage, 2009).

   Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (eds.) *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
9. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (Vintage: London, 1992).

   Tasker&Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism,* 1.
10. McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 12.
11. Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no.2 (2007): 147–66.

    Michelle M. Lazar. 'Entitled to consume: postfeminist femininity and a culture of post-critique', *Discourse and Communication* 3, no.4 (2009): 371–400.

    McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism.*
12. Ednie Kaeh Garrison, 'U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologics of the Third Wave', *Feminist Studies* 26, no.1 (Spring, 2000).
13. Anderson, *Modern Misogyny.*
14. Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc*, 3.
15. Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (US: Warner Bros. Picture, 2011), film.
16. Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture', 147.
17. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation', *Feminist Theory*, 21, no.1 (2020): 5.
18. Tasker&Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism*, 3.
19. Joel Gwynne, 'Japan, postfeminism and the consumption of sexual(ised) schoolgirls in male-authored contemporary manga', *Feminist Theory* 14, no.3 (2013): 325–343.
20. Simidele Dosekun, 'For Western Girls Only? Post-feminism as transnational culture', *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no.6 (2015): 960, 972.
21. State feminism was initially a Scandinavian creation used for explaining the cases of state socialism. See Helga M. Hernes, *Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1987). In this chapter, socialist state feminism refers to the 'institutionalisation of feminism in state agencies' which was promoted by socialist state's gender

policies. See Zheng Wang, *Finding Women in the State* (Oakland: University of California Press), 7.

22. Jie Yang, '"Re-employment Stars": Language, Gender and Neoliberal Re-structuring in China', in *Words and Material Girls: Language, Gender and Global Economies*, ed. Bonnie, S. McElhinny (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), 72–103.
23. 'Times have changed – men and women are equal' is from Mao Zedong's speech with the youth in the Ming Tombs Reservoir in June 1964. See *Long Live the Victory of Mao Zedong Thought* (Beijing: Nanjing Military Command, 1969), 243.
24. Dai Jinhua argues that from a male perspective, the Maoist era was a de-sexualised era while from a female perspective, it was a masculinised process. See Dai Jinhua, *Gendering China* (Taipei: Erya Press Ltd., 2008), 78. I use 'androgynous' to describe 'iron girls' because 'iron girls' shared almost same figures as men on posters. Also, the notion of 'androgynous' offers more possibilities for decoding the 'iron girl' images.
25. Mayfair Yang, 'From gender erasure to gender difference: State feminism, consumer sexuality, and women's public sphere in China', in *Space of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Yang (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 47.
26. Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China. Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).
27. Alicia Stevens and Scott Griffiths, 'Body Positivity in Everyday Life', *Body Image* 35 (2020): 181–191.
28. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16, no.3 (1975), 17.
29. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 11.
30. Ibid., 136.
31. Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, 'Doing Gender', *Gender and Society* 1, no.2 (June 1, 1987): 125–51.
32. Robert Goldman, *Reading Ads Socially* (London: Routledge, 1992).
33. Toni Ingram, '"I feel pretty": Beauty as an affective-material process', *Feminist Theory* 0, no.0 (2021), 2.
34. Nancy J. Hirshman, 'Choosing Betrayal', *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no.1 (2010), 274.
35. Banet-Weiser, 'What is your flava?', 208.
36. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii.
37. Tasker&Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism.*

    Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

38. Banet-Weiser, 'What's your flava?'.
    Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).
    Kimberly Springer, 'Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women', in *Interrogating Postfeminism*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 249–77.
39. Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
40. Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture'.
    Wolf, *The Beauty Myth.*
41. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2005).
42. Hiroshi Wagatsuma, 'The Social Perception of Skin Colour in Japan', *Daedalus* 96, no.2 (1967): 407–443.
43. Graefer, 'White stars and orange celebrities'.
44. The idea of 'post-feminist masquerade' is taken from Riviere's essay 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' in 1929 which describes a notion of femininity as a masquerade. This idea has a psychoanalytic origin: as Riviere (1929: 35) argued, 'women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men'.
45. McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 66, 41.
46. Ibid., 66.
47. Ibid., 65–66.
48. Ibid., 41.
    Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London: Verso, 1992).
    Richard Dyer. *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997).
49. Eva Chen, 'Shanghai(ed) Babies: Geopolitics, Biopolitics and the Global Chick Lit', *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no.2 (2012): 215.
50. Mehita Iqani, *Consumer Culture and the Media: Magazines in the Public Eye* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 96.
51. Ibid.
52. Joan Rivière, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade: 1929', In *Formation of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986): 42.
53. Yun Shao, Fabrice Desmarais and Kay Weaver, 'Chinese advertising practitioners' conceptualisation of gender representation', *International Journal of Advertising* 33, no.2 (2014): 337.
54. Colin Hoskins and Rolf Mirus, 'Reasons for U.S. dominance of the international trade in television programmes', *Media, Culture & Society* 10 no.4 (1988): 499–515.

55. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 30.
56. Ibid., 33.
57. Henry Giroux, *Consuming social change: The United Colours of Benetton* (London: Routledge, 1994): 189.
58. Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai, 'Affirmative Advertising and the Mediated Feeling Rules of Neoliberalism', in *Neoliberalism and the Media*, ed. Marian Meyers (New York: Routledge, 2019): 142.
59. Banet-Weiser, 'What's Your Flava?', 203.
60. Ibid., 204.
61. McRobbie, 'Top Girls? Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract'.
62. Springer, 'Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women', 205.
63. Gill & Kanai, 'Affirmative advertising and the mediated feeling rules of neoliberalism'.
64. Iqani, *Consumer Culture and the Media*, 96.
65. Gill & Elias, 'Awaken your incredible', 185.
66. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*.
67. McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*.
68. Silver-Greenberg, et al., '"Angels" in Hell'.