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Sex, race, and femininity: young Chinese females' responses to lingerie advertising

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of a lingerie model's femininity (submissive vs. assertive), race (East Asian vs. Caucasian), and presence/absence (model-presence vs. product-only) on young Chinese female consumers' advertising evaluation, body image, and gender role attitudes. Results from an experiment show that ads with lingerie models presenting assertive femininity (sexual subjects) receive more positive advertising evaluation but result in more traditional gender role attitudes than ads with those presenting submissive femininity (sexual objects). Caucasian lingerie models receive more positive advertising evaluation than East Asian lingerie models. Product-only lingerie advertisements are more positively evaluated and predict a more positive body image than lingerie advertisements with models. The findings of this study provide empirical support for feminist scholars' critique of the postfeminist media culture and advertising use of sexual empowerment discourse, which paradoxically disempowers women.

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Lingerie advertising; postfeminism; sexual empowerment; race; femininity

Introduction

The lingerie market is an essential part of the women's fashion industry. According to iiMedia Research (2019), China's underwear market surpassed 200 billion Yuan (approximately 31 billion USD) in 2019, 60% of which came from lingerie consumption. Lingerie advertisements are common in fashion media as well as online and offline shopping sites. Sexual appeals are unavoidable in lingerie advertisements, as the products are usually displayed on the body, representing a high level of nudity (Nelson and Paek 2008). Therefore, although the public circulation of images of partially-clad women is likely to offend female consumers (Prendergast, Cheung, and West 2008), they are more acceptable when used in lingerie advertising due to their high congruence with the product type (Liu 2014). However, this does not mean that lingerie advertisements do not annoy female consumers or that lingerie advertising is harmless.

This study categorizes lingerie advertisements by the model's femininity, race, and presence/absence. First, femininity has traditionally been equated with submissiveness. However, under the powerful influence of postfeminist ideas that advocate women's sexual empowerment, assertive femininity is more frequently depicted in lingerie advertisements, representing a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification (Amy-Chinn 2006; Gill 2011). Second, cross-cultural studies find the model's race to be the most significant predictor of using sexual appeal. Western models are more frequently used in sexual advertising content like lingerie advertisements than local models in non-Western countries, especially China (Nelson and Paek 2008). Finally, although small in number, some lingerie advertisements feature no model but only show the product displayed in a creative way. Categorizing lingerie advertisements by these three features (i.e. model femininity, race, and presence/absence) provides an analytic perspective on lingerie advertising and helps to clarify the effects of specific lingerie advertising features.

Lingerie advertising is a typical sexualization media. Studies have established that exposure to sexualization media results in body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, sexist beliefs, traditional gender role attitudes, and a diminished view of women's competence, morality, and humanity (Ward 2016). Therefore, in addition to advertising evaluation (i.e. attitudes towards the ad and brand, purchase intention, and ethical judgments of the ad), this study examines female consumers' responses to lingerie advertisements in terms of body image (i.e. body satisfaction and self-objectification) and gender role attitudes.

In sum, this study compares the effectiveness of lingerie advertisements depending on the model's femininity (submissive vs. assertive), race (East Asian vs. Caucasian), and presence/absence (model-presence vs. product-only), as well as their effects on young Chinese female consumers' body image and gender role attitudes. Young female consumers are the focus of the study because they are the leading force in the Chinese lingerie consumption market (iiMedia Research 2019).

This study contributes to the literature by offering a theoretical framework to categorize lingerie advertisements circulating in the market and by comprehensively investigating young female consumers' responses to these ads. Moreover, it empirically examines feminist scholars' critiques of using sexual empowerment discourse in lingerie advertisements (Gill 2008, 2011). Furthermore, this study is conducted in China, a Confucian cultural entity, where sexuality and femininity have long been restricted. The results shed light on the changing sexual and feminine ideals in this traditional Eastern country under the significant influence of the globalization of postfeminist media culture and provide practical implications for lingerie advertisers targeting Chinese consumers.

Literature review

Model femininity, race, and presence/absence in lingerie advertisements

Model femininity (submissive vs. assertive), race (Caucasian vs. East Asian), and presence/absence (model-presence vs. product-only) are three major features of lingerie advertisements. Femininity has traditionally been associated with passivity or submissiveness (Goffman 1979). Responding to feminist scholars and female consumers'

critiques and anger at stereotypical depictions of women, advertisers, especially for beauty- and fashion-related brands, have created a wave of female empowerment advertising that features assertive, autonomous, and confident femininity (Windels et al. 2020). Lingerie advertisers have enthusiastically embraced this trend. Instead of passive, mute, and submissive sexual objects of the assumed male gaze, they present women as assertive, active, and desiring sexual subjects (Amy-Chinn 2006).

'Sex sells' is a maxim of Western advertising, in which girls', women's and (to a lesser extent) men's bodies are used to sell a variety of products. This overt, Westernized sexuality and Western sexual models have been disseminated worldwide through media and commercial globalization. Numerous cross-cultural studies find that Western models are more likely to appear in sexual advertising than local models (Liu 2014; Nelson and Paek 2008), resulting in local consumers' perceptions that Western women are sexy and Westerners are generally more tolerant of nudity and erotic imagery in public (Zhou and Belk 2004). The dominance of Western models in sexual advertising worldwide relates to global advertisers' standardization strategy and the conservative sexual culture in local markets.

Product-only fashion advertisements showing no model have been overlooked by advertising practitioners and scholars, as it is presumed that clothing must be displayed on the body to show it to the best effect (Phillips and McQuarrie 2011). However, the model's presentation could be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, their presentations make the fashion pieces seem 'alive'. On the other hand, the model's attractive appearance may distract consumers' attention away from the products and limit consumers' elaboration of the ad layout and creativity, a pleasurable aesthetic experience of viewing an ad. This is particularly true with lingerie advertisements (Cummins, Gong, and Reichert 2021), which are often visually dominated by models' alluring bodies.

Given the importance of the three features in lingerie advertising as well as the lack of research on their influence, this study examines their effects on young female consumers' advertising evaluation, body image, and gender role attitudes to contribute to the literature on sexual advertising research.

The effect of model femininity, race, and presence/absence

To understand the effect of the presentation of the model's femininity, race, and presence/absence in lingerie advertisements, this study focuses on three different outcomes, including advertising evaluation, body image, and gender role attitudes. Advertising evaluation represents the advertiser's benefit, whereas body image and gender role attitudes represent the consumer's benefit. Few researchers have examined these outcomes simultaneously. This study aims to identify whether and when a win-win situation for both sides could be achieved in the context of lingerie advertising.

Advertising evaluation

Female empowerment advertising has proven to be a business success. More than half (52%) of the respondents to a survey by SheKnows Media (2016) reported that they had purchased a product because of the brand's positive portrayal of women. Sexual subjects embody a more positive portrayal of women than sexual objects. The

obvious, feel-good messages of empowerment represented in sexual subject portrayal should appeal to young female consumers, who appear to have taken on board the feminist critique of the advertising industry for its representation of women as sex objects, a representation that is likely to trigger their psychological reactance. According to Brehm's (1966) theory of psychological reactance, when people's personal freedom is lost or threatened, they are naturally motivated to recover and protect that freedom. Many studies have documented defensive reactions towards stereotypical advertising portrayals of women among female consumers, including negative attitudes towards ads and brands and decreased purchase intentions (Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen 2017). Accordingly, this study posits the following hypothesis:

H1: Participants will evaluate lingerie advertisements that feature assertive models more positively than those feature submissive models.

China is a Confucian cultural entity where the disclosure of sexuality has been restricted and seductively dressed women are not considered respectable (Prendergast, Cheung, and West 2008). Sexual advertising in China has been pioneered by Western companies and models (Huang and Lowry 2012). Cross-cultural studies find that Chinese ads show a much lower degree of sexuality than other countries do, and Western models are presented with a much higher degree of sexual explicitness than local models (Nelson and Paek 2008). An interview study finds that sexual appeals are more acceptable among Chinese consumers when displayed by Western models than by Chinese models (Zhou and Belk 2004). The Chinese belong to the East Asian racial group. Moreover, although there are various ethnic groups in the West, White Caucasian models are the dominant Western models in the Chinese and other East Asian markets. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Participants will evaluate lingerie advertisements that feature Caucasian models more positively than those feature East Asian models.

Sexual appeal can be categorized into strong, mild, and non-sexual appeal depending on the degree of model nudity (Cui and Yang 2009). Product-only lingerie advertisements can be regarded as non-sexual appeal as there is no model at all, and model-presence lingerie advertisements as strong-sexual appeal since wearing only lingerie indicates a high level of nudity. Non-sexual appeal is more likely to be favoured than strong-sexual appeal among Chinese consumers due to their relatively conservative sexual attitudes (Cui and Yang 2009). In addition, strong-sexual appeal risks offending young female consumers who seem to have endorsed the feminist critique of sexual advertising. Accordingly, this study posits the following hypothesis:

H3: Participants will evaluate product-only lingerie advertisements more positively than model-presence lingerie advertisements.

Body image

Media representations of female beauty are a significant source of women's body image concerns (Levine and Murnen 2009). A substantial literature shows that exposure to body-focused media results in body dissatisfaction among girls and women depending on the extent to which they make self-evaluative social comparisons with

media models (Bessenoff 2006). In addition, according to objectification theory, exposure to sexualized female media images causes women to internalize an observer's perspective about themselves and their appearance, a phenomenon known as self-objectification (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Therefore, lingerie advertising, a typical body-focused, sexualized media, is likely to trigger female consumers' body dissatisfaction and self-objectification, both of which constitute the operationalization of body image in this study.

However, what if lingerie advertising features women as assertive, powerful, and confident sexual subjects? Could this type of representation protect women from a negative body image? Existing theoretical arguments and empirical evidence give an unexpected answer: this type of advertising might be more harmful to women than the traditional type that displays women as sexual objects (Gill 2008; Halliwell, Malson, and Tischner 2011). This phenomenon may be related to the more demanding beauty standards set by sexual-subject images, which reflects the entanglement between feminist and anti-feminist ideas inherent in postfeminist discourse.

Postfeminism is a critical analytical term that 'examines what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media' (Gill 2007, 148). It is distinctive for its complication of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, in which feminist ideas are simultaneously incorporated, revised, depoliticized, and attacked (Gill 2007). The shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification is a typical postfeminist discourse (Gill 2007). Despite connotations of empowerment in the representation of sexual subjectification in advertising, women's power still comes from their bodies and physical attractiveness, and women's value remains as solely physical as before (Gill 2008, 2011). Therefore, the characteristics of idealized beauty do not differ between images of sexual subjects and objects: they are all thin, sleek, and sexualized. Contemporary presentations put forward even higher requirements of women's physical attractiveness. To embody women's strength and power while at the same time adhering to the traditional thin ideal, the model must be extremely thin and simultaneously toned with moderate muscles, which is unattainable for most women. They might be more threatening to women's body satisfaction than thin models as they set up even higher beauty standards.

In addition, contemporary lingerie advertising presentations involve a shift in how power operates, from an external male gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze (Gill 2011). Women's internalization of the male gaze as their own is central to the understanding of self-objectification. Women understand being presented as sexual objects as something done to them from the outside by a sexist advertising industry and have begun to realize and critique this situation through feminist activism. However, when they are presented as sexual subjects, women are not only objectified as they were before but also must understand their objectification as self-chosen and pleasurable, suitable to their liberated interest (Amy-Chinn 2006; Gill 2011). The contemporary depictions of women as sexually assertive agents are more difficult to challenge, particularly because this new image appears to offer empowerment and a welcome shift away from submissive representations (Gill 2011). These depictions may be more potent in leading women to internalize an outsider's or masculinist view of themselves and their appearance and thus engage in self-objectification. Indeed, Halliwell, Malson, and Tischner (2011) find that exposure to sexually agentic representations of women

led to increased self-objectification than sexually passive representations. Based on the above discussion, the following two hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: Participants viewing lingerie advertisements featuring assertive models will report lower body satisfaction than those viewing lingerie advertisements featuring submissive models.

H4b: Participants viewing lingerie advertisements featuring assertive models will report higher self-objectification than those viewing lingerie advertisements featuring submissive models.

When it comes to the advertising feature of model's race in lingerie advertisements, the advantage of using Caucasian models is that doing so might harm Chinese female consumers' body image to a lower degree than using East Asian models. Appearance comparisons with sexually attractive lingerie models result in female consumers' body dissatisfaction. However, people tend to compare themselves with similar others, and racial similarity is a powerful initiator of social comparison (Festinger 1954). Therefore, other-race (i.e. Caucasian) models are less likely to induce Chinese female consumers' appearance comparisons than same-race (i.e. East Asian) models.

In addition, Caucasian models are less likely to induce self-referencing within Chinese female consumers due to racial differences (Hung, Li, and Belk 2007; Lee, Fernandez, and Martin 2002). Self-referencing occurs when consumers relate advertising content to personal experiences or some aspect of their self (Chang and Lee 2011). Chinese female consumers are less likely to relate the sexualization of Caucasian models to the aspect of their self, inducing lower self-objectification. The following hypothesis is thus posited:

H5a: Participants viewing lingerie advertisements featuring East Asian models will report lower body satisfaction than those viewing lingerie advertising featuring Caucasian models.

H5b: Participants viewing lingerie advertisements featuring East Asian models will report higher self-objectification than those viewing lingerie advertising featuring Caucasian models.

When it comes to the feature of model presence/absence in lingerie advertisements, the advantage of depicting products only (i.e. non-sexual appeal) is that doing so threatens female body image to a lower degree than presenting models' alluring bodies (i.e. strong-sexual appeal), as there are no sexually attractive models to compare or self-reference with at all. A large number of studies have established the relationship between exposure to sexualized female images and negative body image (i.e. body dissatisfaction and self-objectification) among female participants (Karsay, Knoll, and Matthes 2018; Krawczyk and Thompson 2015). Thus, this study posits the following hypothesis:

H6a: Participants viewing model-presence lingerie advertisements will report lower body satisfaction than those viewing product-only lingerie advertisements.

H6b: Participants viewing model-presence lingerie advertisements will report higher self-objectification than those viewing product-only lingerie advertisements.

Gender role attitudes

Scholars point out that postfeminist advertising appropriates the feminist discourse of female empowerment and emancipation to attract female consumers while divesting feminism of its values and priorities, including gender equality in personal, political,

economic, cultural, and social arenas and tearing down the systematic oppression of women and structural obstacles to gender equality (Gill 2007; Riordan 2001). They argue that in postfeminist advertising, female empowerment stops at the individual level *via* consumption, which stifles the collective effort to dismantle structural inequality and improve the lives of all women (Riordan 2001). Furthermore, these ads' empowerment and equality discourse might disguise institutional and structural inequalities, hindering critique as consumerist and patriarchal ideologies become interwoven with those of female empowerment and social consciousness (Gill 2008; Lazar 2006).

Contemporary lingerie advertising depicting sexually assertive models (sexual subjects) embodies this entanglement between feminist and anti-feminist ideas about gender equality. On the positive side, it offers a modernized representation of femininity that allows women power and agency and acknowledges women's sexual desire and subjectification (Gill 2008). On the negative side, it ties female empowerment to the possession of a young, slim, and sexy body, whose power is the ability to bring men to their knees (so-called sexual empowerment). Therefore, contemporary representations still promote traditional patriarchal gender role attitudes, and the sexual empowerment discourse is more difficult to challenge as it renders an illusion that women have achieved equality and can 'have it all,' so feminism is no longer needed (Lazar 2006; McRobbie 2004). Indeed, Cato and Carpentier (2010) find that college-aged female viewers' preference for postfeminist reality television is associated with sexual empowerment endorsement and traditional feminine role endorsement. In contrast, traditional lingerie advertising presenting sexually submissive models (sexual objects) may bring to the attention of young female consumers the patriarchal oppression of women and their disadvantageous gender status and trigger their defensive reactions, including a stronger stance on gender equality issues and more egalitarian gender attitudes. The following hypothesis is posited:

H7: Participants viewing lingerie advertisements featuring assertive models will report higher levels of traditional gender role attitudes than those viewing lingerie advertisement featuring submissive models.

Chinese feminism has been significantly influenced by Western feminism (Zheng 2016). Chinese women, especially young and highly educated ones, develop their ideas about gender equality and female empowerment from exposure to Western media depicting egalitarian gender relations and various independent, confident, and empowered female images. For young Chinese women, Western women are icons of female empowerment and liberation, and thus might work as an advertising cue of egalitarian gender roles. However, this argument might not be tenable in the context of lingerie advertising, which portrays women in a highly sexualized way. As there is little evidence for any specific prediction, this study proposes a research question investigating the effect of lingerie model race on young Chinese female consumers' gender role attitudes.

RQ1: Is there a difference in gender role attitudes between participants viewing lingerie advertisements presenting Western models and those viewing lingerie advertisements presenting East Asian models?

Drawing on social cognitive theory, which predicts audiences' learning from and endorsement of media messages, it is expected that sexualized portrayals of women

may prompt individuals' development of gender stereotypes (Bussey and Baudura 1999). Indeed, respondents exposed to sexualized female images, a stereotypical depiction of women, offered stronger support for statements of traditional gender stereotypes than those without this exposure (Ward 2016). However, this effect seems to be more apparent among male rather than female respondents. For example, Kistler and Lee (2009) find this effect among young male viewers, but not among young female viewers, while Schooler (2015) observes that this effect occurs on the implicit, rather than explicit, measure of gender attitudes among young female viewers. Therefore, females' psychological activity might be more complex than males' when facing sexualized female images, which cannot be understood solely under the social cognition paradigm. As a result, this study proposes a research question investigating the effect of lingerie model presence/absence on young female consumers' gender role attitudes.

RQ2: Is there a difference in gender role attitudes between participants viewing product-only lingerie advertisements and those viewing model-presence lingerie advertisements?

Method

Overview and design

An experimental study was conducted to test the hypotheses. This experiment adopts a 2 (model femininity: submissive vs. assertive) \times 2 (model race: East Asian vs. Caucasian) between-subject design with a product-only control group. Caucasian models were ethnically White in appearance and usually of American or European descent. East Asian models were ethnically Asian in appearance and usually of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean descent.

Lingerie advertising uses female models with few subtitles except for brand names, and models mainly use body language to exhibit submissive or assertive femininity. Although scholars have paid attention to the differences between assertive and submissive feminine ideals in advertising (Nam, Lee, and Hwang 2011), few have developed a clear operationalization of submissive and assertive femininity. Through analysis of a large number of advertising pictures, Goffman (1979) developed a systematic operationalization of gender displays (i.e. masculinity and femininity) in advertising using a set of categories (e.g. feminine touch, ritualization of subordination, and licensed withdrawal). In this study, Goffman's masculine and feminine items were respectively used to categorize the lingerie model's body language (e.g. posture, facial expression, and gaze) as assertive or submissive. Based on more recent findings pursuant to Goffman's study (Nam, Lee, and Hwang 2011), some revisions were made to be suitable for the present research. The operationalizations of assertive and submissive femininity are as follows:

- Feminine touch: a person's hands or fingers are used to caress or cradle an object.
Assertive: The model does not touch herself or have a firm grasp of an object.
Submissive: The model cradles or caresses an object with her hands or fingers and may touch her hair, shoulder, or hips or cover her breasts.
- Ritualization of subordination: a person is shown in a submissive position relative to others or viewers.

Assertive: The model is standing erect with her head up. She may sit or recline in a masculine, powerful, and comfortable manner (e.g. open or crossed legs).

Submissive: The model is in a submissive position relative to the viewer. Her body may be tilted, bending forward, reclining, or sitting on some surface (e.g. bed, sofa, and floor). She may be kneeling, crawling, or lying down in a twisted, uncomfortable manner. Her head may be bent down.

- Licenced withdrawal: a person appears psychologically removed from his or her surroundings.

Assertive: The model gazes directly into the lens without smiling (e.g. poker face) or with a wild, seductive, aggressive, or contemptuous expression.

Submissive: The model has a mild or bashful smile or affected expressions. Her head is turned away from the camera, and her eye gaze is averted. She seems psychologically removed from her surroundings (e.g. lowered or closed eyes, looking to the side). She may cover her mouth, face, or breasts with a hand or object. She may hide her face or body.

- Independence and self-assurance: evaluation of a person's overall image in terms of independence and self-assurance.

Assertive: The model appears to be autonomous and confident

Submissive: The model appears to be shy, soft, and helpless.

- Camera position: an indicator of the power relation between the model and viewer.

Assertive: The model is in an upward position, indicating domination of the viewer.

Submissive: The model is in a downward position, indicating subordination to the viewer.

Stimuli

To enhance external validity, actual electronic lingerie advertising pictures were used as stimuli in this experiment. Online fashion magazines, online shopping sites, and official sites of lingerie brands were searched for images that met the previously mentioned operationalized standards of femininity and race. Multiple ($n= 10$) ads were used to direct participants' attention to the ad category, rather than the specific executional or physical features of any individual ad or model. Each ad featured only one model, and ads featuring celebrities were not included to avoid the influence of celebrity endorsement. The stimuli for the control group included 10 electronic product-only ads featuring various lingerie items. To maintain consistency and reduce potential confounds, brand names, taglines, and verbal information were digitally erased. See [Appendix 1](#) for exemplar ads of these images.

Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited in the university town of Guangzhou, China, which hosts 10 major universities. Recruitment messages were posted on student WeChat groups (WeChat is the most widely used social media platform in China). The experiment was described as a study on advertising effectiveness among female consumers. The sample of 144 female university students had a mean age of 21.74 ($SD=1.49$, range =19–27) and a mean body mass index (BMI) of 19.50 ($SD= 1.49$, range = 16.02–27.22).

The experiment was conducted in a lab. Small groups of three to five participants were told that an anonymous lingerie brand had shot a series of lingerie ads to promote its new collection, and their job was to assess the effectiveness of these ads. Individual iMacs were situated at each corner of the lab. The participants drew lots to receive their seat (iMac) assignments. The participants could not communicate with each other or see other participants' screens. First, the participants were asked to watch a silent video showing these 10 ads one by one, with each ad staying on the screen for 10 s. After viewing the video, the participants were directed to a folder containing all of the ads and asked to look at any ads of their choice. After this free viewing, the participants were asked to complete an advertising effectiveness questionnaire that measured manipulation and advertising evaluation variables.

To reduce demand characteristics, after completing the advertising effectiveness experiment, the participants were invited to another room and thanked for their participation. Then, the researcher asked if they would like to complete a separate paper-based questionnaire for a different study about female college student well-being. All participants agreed to do so. Measures of body image outcomes and gender role attitudes were presented in the middle of the long paper questionnaire addressing various aspects of student well-being. Upon completion, the participants were thanked and debriefed. Each participant received 50 RMB (7.20 USD) for remuneration.

Measures

Advertising evaluation

The advertising evaluation was operationalized as the attitudes towards the ad (A_{ad}) and brand (A_b), purchase intention (PI), and ethical judgments of the ad. Both A_{ad} and A_b were measured on a nine-point semantic differential scale with a point of neutrality in the middle. A_{ad} was measured with three antonym pairs: unattractive-attractive, unpleasant-pleasant, and not convincing-persuasive, and A_b was measured with four antonym pairs: unlikeable-likeable, negative-positive, bad-good, and not reliable-reliable (Borau and Bonnefon 2017).

PI was measured by asking the participants the degree to which they agreed with four statements: 'I would like to buy the product,' 'I will search for information about the product,' 'The product seems to be an excellent choice,' and 'I will recommend the product to my friends' (1 = 'strongly disagree' and 9 = 'strongly agree').

Ethical judgments were measured by asking participants the degree to which they regarded the ads as 'just,' 'fair,' 'traditionally acceptable,' 'culturally acceptable,' 'morally right,' and 'acceptable to my family' (1 = 'not at all' and 9 = 'extremely'; LaTour and Henthorne 1994).

All advertising evaluation variables showed good reliability (A_{ad} , $\alpha=0.93$; A_b , $\alpha=0.95$; PI, $\alpha=0.90$; Ethical judgment, $\alpha=0.91$);).

Body image

Body image was operationalized as body satisfaction and self-objectification. Body satisfaction was measured with the Body Image Ideals Questionnaire (BIQ, Cash and Szymanski 1995). The participants were asked the degree to which they were satisfied

with their various body parts *right now* (e.g. height, weight, waist, leg, skin colour, hair texture, eyes, nose, and face shape). Fourteen items were included (0 = extremely unsatisfied, 10 = extremely satisfied; $\alpha = 0.83$).

Self-objectification was measured using the Twenty Statements Test (TST, Fredrickson et al. 1998). The participants were asked to complete up to 20 sentences beginning with 'I am.' The appearance-related statements were coded as self-objectification.

Gender role attitudes

Gender role attitudes were measured with the 10-item Gender Role Egalitarian Attitudes Test (GREAT) by Chang (1999), which measures gender attitudes along the two domains of work and domestic roles. The work domain includes five items: 'be a leader,' 'have a successful career,' 'conduct business,' 'receive highest education possible,' and 'make money.' The home domain also includes five items: 'take care of children,' 'do laundry,' 'do housework,' 'cook at home,' and 'shop for groceries.' The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought each item was more important for men or women, using a 9-point scale (-4 = very important for men, 0 = same importance for men and women, 4 = very important for women). Positive scores (1, 2, 3, 4) represent more importance for women than men, and negative scores (-1, -2, -3, -4) represent more importance for men than women. The higher the absolute value, the higher the degree of importance. The items were averaged to form the indices of the *work domain* ($\alpha = 0.75$) and *home domain* ($\alpha = 0.74$). For both the home and work indices, the closer to 0, the more egalitarian the attitudes towards gender roles, whereas the farther from 0, the more traditional the attitudes towards gender roles.

Manipulation items

The manipulation items included the models' race and feminine traits. The participants were asked to guess the home country or area of the models (0 = East Asian regions, 1 = Western countries). The participants were also asked to indicate the degree to which these models presented a series of personalities on an 11-point scale (0 = not at all, 10 = extremely). *Assertiveness* items included 'confident,' 'independent,' 'strong and powerful,' and 'assertive' ($\alpha = 0.94$). *Submissiveness* items included 'affected,' 'submissive,' and 'other-pleasing' ($\alpha = 0.94$; den Hartog 2004). The participant demographics included age, height, and weight (for BMI computation).

Results

Randomization and manipulation checks

A series of ANOVAs and *t* tests revealed the experimental randomization and manipulations to be successful. ANOVA revealed no significant group differences in age ($F(4, 139) = 1.02, p > .05$) or BMI ($F < 1$). The *t* tests revealed that participants rated models in the assertive groups as more assertive than those in the submissive groups ($M_{\text{Assertive}} = 6.58, M_{\text{Submissive}} = 5.86; t(117) = -3.21, p < .01$) and models in the submissive groups as more submissive than those in the assertive groups ($M_{\text{Submissive}} = 4.37, M_{\text{Assertive}} = 3.32; t(117) = 3.33, p < .001$). The participants who did not correctly identify the race of the models were deleted from analysis.

Table 1. Two-way ANCOVAs and *t* tests: means (standard deviations in parentheses) for dependent variables.

	Model femininity		Model race		Model presence/absence	
	Submissive (<i>n</i> = 59)	Assertive (<i>n</i> = 60)	East Asian (<i>n</i> = 60)	Caucasian (<i>n</i> = 59)	Model-presence (<i>n</i> = 119)	Product-only (<i>n</i> = 25)
<i>Advertising evaluation</i>						
Ad attitudes	5.75 ^a (0.95)	6.05 ^b (0.89)	5.65 ^a (0.92)	6.15 ^b (0.88)	5.90 (0.93)	5.79 (0.75)
Brand attitudes	5.43 ^a (1.45)	6.06 ^b (1.30)	5.20 ^a (1.48)	6.31 ^b (1.09)	5.75 (1.41)	6.02 (1.12)
Purchase intention	3.95 (2.02)	4.05 (2.00)	3.47 ^a (1.88)	4.54 ^b (2.00)	4.00 ^a (2.00)	5.25 ^b (1.85)
Ethical judgments	4.84 ^a (1.62)	5.64 ^b (1.27)	5.18 (1.37)	5.31 (1.64)	5.24 ^a (1.50)	6.28 ^b (1.22)
<i>Body image</i>						
Body satisfaction	4.83 (1.55)	4.97 (1.12)	4.97 (1.34)	4.83 (1.36)	4.90 ^a (1.34)	5.66 ^b (1.42)
Self-objectification	0.85 (1.14)	1.18 (1.36)	0.92 (1.31)	1.12 (1.22)	1.02 ^a (1.26)	0.56 ^b (0.87)
<i>Gender role attitudes</i>						
Work domain	-0.53 ^a (1.02)	-0.95 ^b (1.01)	-0.68 (0.99)	-0.80 (1.08)	-0.74 (1.03)	-0.70 (0.65)
Home domain	0.46 ^a (0.70)	0.71 ^b (0.62)	0.53 (0.66)	0.64 (0.68)	0.58 (0.67)	0.59 (0.55)

Note. Means with different superscripts differ significantly.

Hypothesis testing

To test H1, H2, H4a, H4b, H5a, H5b, H7, and RQ1, a set of two-way ANCOVAs was conducted, and to test H3, H6a, and H6b and answer RQ2, a set of *t* tests were conducted. When advertising evaluation and body image variables were dependent variables, BMI was included as a covariate due to its impact on female body image and female consumers' evaluation of advertising displays of attractive female models (Borau and Bonnefon 2017). When gender role variables were the dependent variable, age was included as the covariate because it is a strong predictor of gender role attitudes among Chinese young adults in coastal cities (Tu and Liao 2005).

As Table 1 shows, model femininity has a main effect on A_b ($F(1, 108) = 5.67, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$) and ethical judgments ($F(1, 108) = 8.61, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$). In addition, the effect of model femininity reached marginal significance for A_{ad} ($F(1, 108) = 3.61, p = .06, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$); and no significance for PI ($F < 1$). As expected, participants exposed to lingerie models presenting assertive (vs. submissive) femininity reported more favourable A_b ($M_{Assertive} = 6.06, M_{Submissive} = 5.43$), A_{ad} ($M_{Assertive} = 6.05, M_{Submissive} = 5.75$), and ethical judgments ($M_{Assertive} = 5.64, M_{Submissive} = 4.84$). Therefore, H1 is largely supported.

Model race has a main effect on A_{ad} ($F(1, 108) = 7.99, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$), A_b ($F(1, 108) = 22.02, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.17$), and PI ($F(1, 108) = 11.67, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = 0.10$) but not on ethical judgments ($F < 1$). As predicted, participants exposed to Caucasian lingerie models reported more favourable A_{ad} ($M_{Caucasian} = 6.15, M_{East Asian} = 5.65$), A_b ($M_{Caucasian} = 6.31, M_{East Asian} = 5.20$), and PI ($M_{Caucasian} = 4.54; M_{East Asian} = 3.47$). Therefore, H2 is largely supported.

Model presence/absence has a main effect on PI ($t(142) = 2.87, p < .01, d = 0.65$) and ethical judgments ($t(142) = 3.22, p < .01, d = 0.75$), but not on A_{ad} ($t(142) = -0.55, p > .05$) or A_b ($t(142) = 0.91, p > .05$). As expected, participants exposed to product-only (vs. model-presence) lingerie advertisements reported higher PI ($M_{Product-only} = 5.25, M_{Model-presence} = 4.00$) and more favourable ethical judgments ($M_{Product-only} = 6.28; M_{Model-presence} = 5.24$). Therefore, H3 is partially supported.

Neither model femininity nor race has a main effect on body satisfaction (model femininity: $F < 1$; model race: $F < 1$) or self-objectification (model femininity: $F(1, 108)$

= 1.53, $p > .05$; model race: $F < 1$). As a result, H4a, H4b, H5a, and H5b are not supported. In contrast, model presence/absence has a main effect on body satisfaction ($t(142) = 2.56$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.55$), and the effect of model presence/absence on self-objectification reaches marginal significance ($t(142) = -1.72$, $p = .08$, $d = 0.42$). As predicted, participants exposed to product-only lingerie ads reported higher body satisfaction ($M_{\text{Product-only}} = 5.66$, $M_{\text{Model-presence}} = 4.90$) and lower self-objectification ($M_{\text{Product-only}} = 0.56$, $M_{\text{Model-presence}} = 1.02$) than those exposed to model-presence ads featuring sexually attractive models. Hence, H6a and H6b are supported.

To further explore possible effects, one-way ANCOVAs were conducted. *Post-hoc* analysis reveals that viewing either assertive or submissive lingerie models predicted lower body satisfaction in comparison to viewing product-only lingerie advertisements. Viewing assertive lingerie models predicted higher self-objectification than viewing product-only lingerie advertisements. However, viewing submissive lingerie models predicted no significantly different self-objectification in comparison to viewing product-only lingerie advertisements. Thus, supporting previous findings (Halliwell, Malson, and Tischner 2011), the results of this study cautiously suggest that assertive lingerie models (i.e. sexual subjectification images) are more harmful than submissive lingerie models (i.e. sexual objectification images), as the former increase the viewer's self-objectification.

In addition, viewing Caucasian lingerie models predicted lower body satisfaction and higher self-objectification than viewing product-only lingerie advertisements. However, viewing East Asian lingerie models predicted no significantly different body satisfaction or self-objectification in comparison to viewing product-only lingerie advertisements. Therefore, contrary to the study's prediction, the results cautiously suggest that Caucasian (other-race) lingerie models are more harmful than East-Asian (same-race) lingerie models, as the former increase the viewer's body dissatisfaction and self-objectification.

The participants in this study had relatively traditional attitudes about gender roles, as indicated by the overall negative values in the work domain and positive values in the home domain, suggesting that they felt that work roles were more important for men and that home roles were more important for women. Importantly, model femininity has main effects on the scores of both the work ($F(1, 114) = 4.86$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$) and home domains ($F(1, 114) = 3.96$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$) of the GREAT. Participants exposed to ads showing assertive femininity reported more traditional attitudes towards gender roles than those exposed to ads showing submissive femininity (work domain: $M_{\text{Assertive}} = -0.95$, $M_{\text{Submissive}} = -0.53$; home domain: $M_{\text{Assertive}} = 0.71$, $M_{\text{Submissive}} = 0.46$). For both domains, $M_{\text{Submissive}}$ (vs. $M_{\text{Assertive}}$) was closer to 0, indicating a more egalitarian attitude towards gender roles. Hence, H7 is fully supported.

Neither model race nor presence/absence has main effect on the scores for either the work domain (Model race: $F < 1$; model presence/absence: $t < 1$) or home domain (Model race: $F < 1$; model presence/absence: $t < 1$) of the GREAT. This indicates that there is no difference in gender role attitudes between participants viewing Caucasian lingerie models and those viewing East Asian lingerie models (RQ1), or between those viewing product-only lingerie advertisements and those viewing model-presence lingerie advertisements (RQ2).

Finally, the race x femininity interaction effect has no significance for any dependent variable [A_{ad} : $F < 1$; A_b : $F < 1$; PI: $F < 1$; ethical judgments: $F < 1$; body satisfaction:

$F < 1$; self-objectification: $F(1, 108)=1.85, p > .05$; work domain: $F(1, 114)=1.13, p > .05$; home domain: $F < 1$].

Discussion

This study examines the effects of the lingerie model's femininity (submissive vs. assertive), race (East Asian vs. Caucasian), and presence/absence (model-presence vs. product-only) on young Chinese female consumers' advertising evaluation, body image, and gender role attitudes. The findings provide several theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study reveal both positive and negative effects of sexual empowerment advertising. On the positive side, lingerie ads presenting assertive models (sexual subjects) are more favourably evaluated by young female consumers than traditional ones that present submissive models (sexual objects). This effect does not differ by model race as indicated by the nonsignificant interaction effect on advertising evaluation. It seems that assertive or powerful sexuality is becoming a new sexual ideal in China in the context of the globalization of Western postfeminism. However, things you like may also harm you. Viewing lingerie advertisements presenting sexual subjects predicted lower body satisfaction and higher self-objectification in comparison to viewing product-only lingerie advertisements. Although viewing lingerie advertisements presenting sexual objects also predicted lower body satisfaction in comparison to viewing product-only lingerie advertisements, there was no difference in self-objectification between the sexual objects and products-only viewing groups. Therefore, sexual subjectification images are as harmful as sexual objectification images in inducing viewers' body dissatisfaction, and are more harmful than sexual objectification images in inducing viewers' self-objectification (Halliwell, Malson, and Tischner 2011).

More importantly, participants exposed to lingerie models presenting sexual subjects endorse the gender stereotypes that work roles are more appropriate for men, whereas home roles are more appropriate for women to a higher degree than those exposed to lingerie models presenting sexual objects. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that sexual empowerment advertising may at best empower women with some positive feelings as indicated by the favourable advertising evaluation but disempower them with negative body image and lower egalitarian gender attitudes. If anybody benefits, it is the business rather than women or the cause of feminism (Gill 2007; Lazar 2006).

This study also contributes to the literature that examines the effect of sexualizing media on female audiences and suggests that females' cognitive response to sexualized female media images might be distinct from that of males. Similar to previous studies (Kistler and Lee 2009; Schooler 2015), this study finds no significantly different gender role attitudes between female viewers who saw model-presence lingerie advertisements (sexual appeal) and those who saw product-only lingerie advertisements (non-sexual appeal). This result probably relates to the manipulation of lingerie models' femininity type (submissive vs. assertive) in this study, which, as the results show, produced opposite effects on female viewers' gender role attitudes. Although they were less favoured by young female consumers, the sexual objectification images

(i.e. submissive lingerie models) called their attention to the gender stereotypes that women suffer, stimulating their defensive reactions such as a stronger endorsement of egalitarian gender role attitude. In contrast, the appealing empowerment message in sexual subjectification images (i.e. assertive lingerie models) conceals the gender stereotypes that women still suffer (e.g. objectification and sexualization), inducing young females to let down their guard against traditional gender ideology. Therefore, female viewers' responses to sexualized female images might involve much more complex reflection. More diverse theoretical perspectives in addition to social cognition (e.g. psychological reactance and postfeminism) could be applied to fully understand female viewers' responses to sexualized female images, especially since various new sexualized female images have begun to appear in media like the sexual empowerment/subjectification images discussed in this study.

As predicted, lingerie ads presenting Caucasian (vs. East Asian) models received more positive A_{ad} and A_b and higher PI. However, lingerie ads presenting East Asian models were judged to be as ethical or culturally acceptable as those presenting Caucasian models, indicating that today's young Chinese females endorse a more open attitude toward the sexual beauty ideal, at least in the context of lingerie advertising. However, it should not be interpreted that overt female sexuality is welcomed in China. Product-only (vs. model-presence) lingerie advertisements were judged as more ethical. Therefore, sexual appeal is still less culturally accepted than nonsexual appeal in China even when it is highly congruent with the product type.

This study predicted that exposure to Caucasian lingerie models may not harm young Chinese female consumers' body image as much as exposure to East Asian lingerie models does, as the apparent racial difference might inhibit their appearance comparison and self-reference with Caucasian models. However, viewing Caucasian lingerie models predicted lower body satisfaction and higher self-objectification in comparison to viewing product-only lingerie advertisements, but no significant difference in body satisfaction or self-objectification was found between participants who saw East Asian lingerie models and those who saw product-only lingerie advertisements. Therefore, contrary to the prediction, Caucasian (other-race) lingerie models are potentially more harmful to young Chinese females' body image than East Asian (same-race) models. It appears that young Chinese females do make appearance comparisons with Caucasian models. This may relate to the fact that physical appearance is such an important attribute for women, who, therefore, tend to make many seemingly unreasonable appearance comparisons, including comparisons with dissimilar targets like the other-race models in this study (Halliwell 2012). Moreover, as Caucasian women are regarded as sexually attractive, comparison with them is more likely to induce young Chinese females' body dissatisfaction. The result for self-objectification might be related to the fact that Caucasian models dominate sexual advertising in China, exposure to whom is more likely to arouse young Chinese females' sexuality schema and therefore self-objectification.

Managerial implications

The results of this study provide several managerial implications for lingerie advertisers. First, presenting assertive femininity or employing sexual empowerment discourse could be an effective advertising strategy. However, a lingerie brand with social

responsibility and long-term vision should not overuse this strategy due to its potential negative influence on female consumers, including body image concerns and traditional gender attitudes. Moreover, with the rising feminist critique of such postfeminist advertising, young female consumers are becoming increasingly vigilant about the advertising use of feminist discourse such as female empowerment (Malson et al. 2011), and female empowerment advertisements that lack authenticity are likely to backfire. Femininity does not have to be either submissive or assertive, both of which discipline women (Gill 2007). Lingerie advertisers could improve the authenticity of female empowerment messages in ads by exploring more diverse presentations of women and portraying women as happy, relaxed, comfortable, and natural, focusing on how women feel about their bodies rather than how they look.

Second, the findings indicate that Caucasian lingerie models are more effective than East Asian models in the Chinese market. Therefore, Western lingerie brands could use the standardization strategy of featuring Western models when entering the Chinese market, and local Chinese brands also could use Western models to build a global image. However, this strategy may strengthen the stereotype of Western women as sexy, ignoring their other important characteristics as human beings. Therefore, lingerie advertisers should consider how to promote products without exploiting women's bodies rather than whose bodies to promote (i.e. ours (same-race) or theirs (other-race)?). This study shows that product-only lingerie ads are a possible solution that strikes a balance between the advertisers' and consumers' benefits.

Lingerie advertisers should break the unwritten industry rule of using sexy models to sell lingerie. Consumers might feel fatigued with lingerie advertising images of sexy models and perceive product-only lingerie ads as unique and creative. However, this does not mean that any product-only lingerie ads would be positively evaluated. Those with appealing and creative layouts that offer aesthetic pleasure to the audience are more likely to grab consumers' attention and be positively evaluated. Therefore, lingerie advertisers should invest more economic and human resources in product-only ads.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has some limitations. First, the sample was drawn from a population of female undergraduate students, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could target more diverse female groups, such as less educated females, adolescent girls or middle and old-aged women, and females in rural areas.

Second, the study used real lingerie advertisements as stimuli. Although such advertisements enhance external validity, they could not perfectly control potential confounds (e.g. different ad layouts, lingerie items, and models), limiting internal validity. This study included 10 ads in each group to minimize the influence of a specific layout or physical feature of any individual ad or model. Moreover, the East Asian and Caucasian models in the assertive groups and the submissive groups were comparable in their postures, gazes, activities, and settings. To better control this influence, future studies could use lingerie ads created by professionals with strict controls (e.g. same group of East Asian and Caucasian models, same lingerie items, same assertive/submissive postures and expressions, and same surroundings and layouts).

Third, this study used lingerie advertising pictures as stimuli and operationalized assertive and submissive femininity with the model's body language. Future researchers could replicate this study with lingerie commercials and operationalize femininity as the model's verbal language.

Finally, this study was conducted in China, a Confucian Eastern country with conservative sexual and gender role values and a relatively short history of feminist activism. Future researchers could replicate this study in a Western context.

Despite the above limitations, this is one of the first studies to empirically test the effect of postfeminist advertising. The results support feminist scholars' critique that it disempowers women with empowerment discourse (Gill 2007, 2008).

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Data availability statement

The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Appendix 1. Exemplar lingerie ads used in experiment



Assertive & Caucasian



Submissive & Caucasian



Product-only



Assertive & East Asian



Submissive & East Asian



Product-only