

Expressions of Women's Empowerment in L'Oréal China Advertisements: A Comparative Analysis of Image Ads and Product Ads

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Abstract: In recent years, the research on advertisements (ads) that promote women's empowerment has focused on their commercial implications, consumerist characteristics, and the portrayal of women within them. Nevertheless, they tend to treat women's empowerment ads as a monolithic entity, neglecting the differences in production purposes and ideological expressions between image and product ads. Taking L'Oréal's iconic slogan "Because We're Worth It", which commemorates its 50th anniversary, as an entry point, the study selects the ten most popular image and product ads released by L'Oréal on major media platforms in China since 2021. In addition, through a comparative analysis based on content analysis, it explores how these two types of ads express feminist ideas in terms of textual content, core symbolic figures, and narrative structures. Focusing on the expression of feminism in L'Oréal China's ads, the comparative analysis reveals the similarities and differences between image and product ads. The results indicate that image ads emphasize a culture of confidence and individualism, conveying the concept of women empowerment through emotional narratives, while product ads rely more on commodity feminism, linking consumer behavior to women's confidence and capabilities. Based on these insights, it offers insights to refine L'Oréal's advertising strategies.

Keywords: Comparative Analysis of Advertising, L'Oréal, Women's Empowerment, Content Analysis.

1. Introduction

The dissemination of global feminist ideology has resulted in advertising becoming an instrumental medium for conveying the concept of women's empowerment, serving commercial and social-cultural functions. And the majority of extant studies focus on the commercial impact and consumerist aspects of ads promoting women's empowerment. Nevertheless, these studies tend to neglect the distinctions between image and product ads in terms of production objectives and ideological expression. In order to fill this research gap, the study focuses on women empowerment ads released by L'Oréal on major media platforms in China since 2021, selecting 10 image ads and 10 product ads each based on the heat of communication. Using content analysis, this research examines the similarities and differences in the expression of feminist ideas in both types of ads. Moreover, it reveals the formal characteristics of these two types of ads and provides strategic guidance for

enhancing the efficacy of both image and product ads in achieving better communication outcomes. Through a comparative analysis of women's empowerment expressions in image and product ads, this paper deepens the understanding of feminist thought in advertising communication and provides insights for optimizing advertising strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Women Empowerment Advertisements and Postfeminism

The concept of women empowerment predates the emergence of women empowerment ads, which are commercial ads originating in Europe and America that incorporate the idea of empowering women and aim to celebrate and uplift them through their narratives. The term "femvertising," a blend of "feminism" and "advertising," was first introduced in a 2014 advertising survey report published by She Knows, an American digital media company [1]. Women empowerment ads have also been defined as the use of pro-female personnel, messaging, and imagery to empower women, including girls [2]. With the dissemination of post-feminist ideology, societal perceptions of women continue to change, and women's purchasing power and social influence have been increasing. Advertisers incorporate the concept of women's empowerment into advertisements to attract female consumers and to shape a positive brand image. These women empowerment ads are widely disseminated through mass media, conveying post-feminist values to a broader audience. However, due to the commercial nature of advertising, there is a potential for these post-feminist ideas to be simplified or distorted, thereby deviating from the original intent of women's empowerment inherent in post-feminism. During the development of women empowerment ads, a series of framing narratives have evolved. Research has identified six common elements of post-feminist discourse in advertisements: commodity feminism, individualization, self-surveillance, new lens on the embrace of femininity, confidence culture and love your body. Women empowerment ads often utilize multiple discourses simultaneously, with the use of a culture of confidence being the most prevalent [3].

2.2. The Benefits of Women Empowerment Advertisements

Women empowerment ads demonstrate significant commercial advantages over traditional ads in that they elicit more positive attitudes from female consumers [4]. Akestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen further substantiated through experimental methods that women empowerment ads align with the psychological demands of female consumers, thereby highlighting potential value in the commercial marketing domain [5]. However, not all consumers hold positive attitudes toward women empowerment ads. Some studies indicate that certain consumers possess the ability to recognize emotional manipulation in advertisements, leading to adverse reactions [6]. This phenomenon reflects an inherent contradiction in the creation and dissemination of current women empowerment advertisements: how to balance attracting consumers while avoiding being perceived as emotionally manipulative. On the societal benefits level, some studies have identified the positive implications inherent in women empowerment advertisements. The increasing representation of female work roles in advertisements has been shown to positively influence women's participation in the labor market [7]. However, a significant issue emerges from the research: despite the stance taken by companies on women's issues, the feminist perspectives conveyed in advertisements may actually hinder the advancement of gender equality, while also avoiding the real problems women face [8]. Driven by commercial interests, businesses using feminist elements in advertising often fail to address the deeper issues confronting women. There is no systematic research on how to accurately assess the feminist perspectives conveyed in advertisements and how to construct empowering images that truly contribute to gender equality. Future research could focus on this issue, delving into how

comprehensive and meaningful concepts of women’s empowerment can be incorporated into advertisement creation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample Selection

The research samples were selected from advertisements published on platforms such as L’Oréal’s official website, Douyin, Bilibili, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu. Based on dissemination popularity, 10 advertisements featuring female imagery and 10 product advertisements, all released in China after 2021, were chosen. Prior to sample selection, deduplication and screening were conducted to ensure the independence of advertisements released across multiple platforms. The advertisements were deduplicated based on their unique IDs and URLs to ensure that only one version of each advertisement was retained; for advertisements with identical content, the version from the platform with the highest view count, interaction rate, and topic popularity was given priority. This study uses the formula employed by Yan Zhang and Yan Yin, which applies the coefficient of variation method to assign weights to the metrics of likes, comments, and shares of short videos to comprehensively measure their dissemination popularity [9]:

$$\text{Dissemination Popularity} = (0.1966 \times \text{Number of Likes} + 0.3328 \times \text{Number of Comments} + 0.4677 \times \text{Number of Shares}) \times 1000 \quad (1)$$

According to the aforementioned formula, the popularity of the selected image and product advertisements was calculated, and the bar charts were generated as follows. Figure 1 shows the “Image Advertisements Popularity Ranked Top 10”, and Figure 2 shows the “Product Advertisements Popularity Ranked Top 10”.

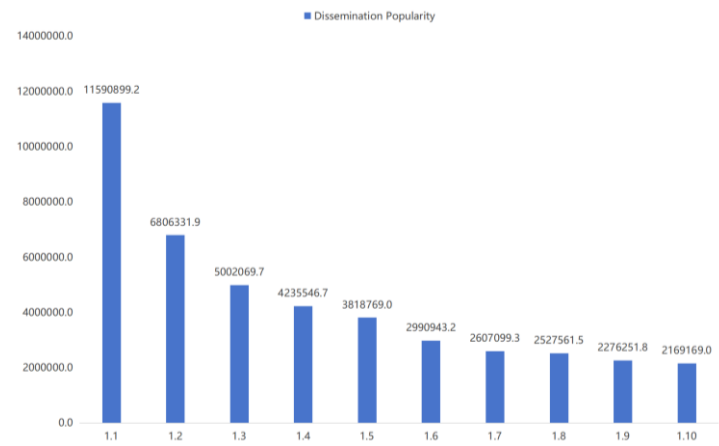


Figure 1: Image Advertisements Popularity Ranked Top 10

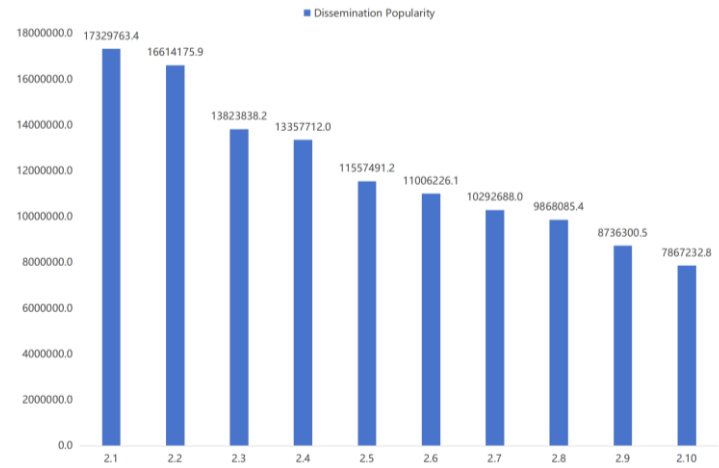


Figure 2: Product Advertisements Popularity Ranked Top 10

After screening, a total of 20 advertisements were finalized, as shown in Table 1. These advertisements were labeled as 1.1-1.10 (image advertisements) and 2.1-2.10 (product advertisements), and information such as platform, release date, and headline copy was retained.

Table 1: Statistical Summary of Advertisement Sample Selection

Sample	Name	Sample	Name
1.1	Weibo2024-04-17“My best role is always going to be the next one.”	2.1	Douyin2022-07-18Lipstick's calling you to the stunning blue coast of the South of France!
1.2	Bilibili2022-09-22[Double Mirror] I'm just okay at it too.	2.2	Douyin2022-03-18"The new generation is even better! #Second Generation Filler HA"
1.3	Douyin2024-04-19"I'm a debater and a lawyer. Zhan Qingyun: 'I don't live for society's expectations of women; I live for my own values.'	2.3	Douyin2022-02-23L'Oreal Paris Revitalift Derm Intensives: Restore elasticity, firm your skin, and combat early signs of aging!"
1.4	Douyin2024-04-19@Jiangxunqian: When women's roles in intangible cultural heritage are no longer a minority, every moment of perseverance counts.	2.4	Weibo2024-09-02 On camera, she's killing it, showing the world what her character's all about; off camera, she's working her butt off to get even better.
1.5	Douyin2024-04-19Sociologist @Li Yinhe:We can build our own universe, tackle life's ups and downs, and chase after love and freedom."	2.5	Weibo2024-08-24In a rush? Got a flight to catch? Or looking to steal the show?
1.6	Douyin2024-04-17L'Oréal presents 'A Night Worth It': Fearless in life, let's embrace what truly matters together!	2.6	Douyin2022-07-29The real game changer is holding your ground to stay in the game, then turning the tables to win!

Table 1: (continued).

1.7	Douyin2024-04-19 "Different identities are not tags for @Zhou Yijun but dimensions through which she explores the world: 'Professionalism makes everything worthwhile.'"	2.7	Douyin2022-09-12 BRIGHT REVEAL contains 6 major polishing ingredients, unveiling a delicate and transformative skin rejuvenation!
1.8	Douyin2024-04-23Avenue of Worth: Embrace a life of worth. No matter your age, body shape, or background, shine brightly with every step and pursue beauty!"	2.8	Douyin2022-09-30With the change to early autumn, make sure you've got the BRIGHT REVEAL to keep your skin protected!
1.9	Bilibili2023-07-22Transcending time and space to paint a magnificent landscape; the vibrant greens are all you need	2.9	Douyin2022-08-16Know what you want and keep pushing yourself to go further and break through
1.10	Douyin2024-04-20Young dancer Zhang Yashu expresses herself through dance: "Keep the passion for your dreams alive. It is worth making love traceable"	2.10	Weibo2024-09-13Surprisingly Good Alert! Even L'Oréal Paris brand ambassador Tang Yan is captivated!

3.2. Analytical Framework

This study classifies and statistically analyzes the selected advertisements at three levels: textual content, visual symbols, and narrative discourse. By utilizing intuitive data, the research highlights the characteristics of L'Oréal's image and product advertisements, further exploring and examining the differences in their expressions of female empowerment. Textual content encompasses the linguistic elements in advertisements, including written narratives, dialogues, slogans, and other language features. These elements, through various combinations and presentations, convey the advertisement's theme, brand ideology, and notions of female empowerment to the audience. Based on the post-feminist discourse elements present in the advertisements, the textual content is categorized into six aspects: commodity feminism, individualization, self-surveillance, new lens on the embrace of femininity, confidence culture and love your body [3], a single advertisement at this level may contain multiple discursive elements. The analysis of key characters is based on the statistical evaluation of individuals featured in the advertisements, including their demographic characteristics (identity, gender, age) and the interpersonal relationships portrayed within the advertisement visuals. Since multiple characters may appear in a single advertisement, the total sample size for each section may vary. The narrative structure refers to the organization and expression of the story in the advertisement, encompassing three key components: narrative perspective, narrative angle, and narrative grammar. The narrative structure is meticulously designed to effectively convey the concept of female empowerment and product information, determining how the story is told, how the message is communicated, and how the audience perceives the conveyed information.

4. Results

4.1. Textual Content

Table 2: Summary and Statistics of Textual Content

Category	Commodity Feminism	Individualization	Self-surveillance	New Lens on the Embrace of Femininity	Confidence Culture	Love Your Body
Image Advertisement	1(4.8%)	7(33.3%)	-	3(14.3%)	8(38.1%)	2(9.5%)
Product Advertisement	8(61.5%)	1(7.7%)	-	1(7.7%%)	2(15.4%)	1(7.7%)

As shown in Table 2, the texts in the image ads mainly emphasize the culture of self-confidence (38.1%) and individualism (33.3%), encouraging women to accept and love their own appearance in an attempt to broaden the definition of beauty. However, such advertisements attribute appearance anxiety to a lack of self-confidence, avoiding the influence of societal standards of beauty. While body positivity (9.5%) and new feminist perspectives (14.3%) were also addressed, only 4.8% related to commodity feminism. Despite this small percentage, it still reflects the promotion of diverse feminist images that encourage women to embrace different body states and identities. In contrast, product ads are dominated by commodity feminism (61.5%), linking female empowerment closely to consumption behaviour and emphasizing confidence and empowerment through the purchase of specific products. The analysis shows that L’Oreal’s image ads focus on a culture of confidence and individualism, while product ads favor commodity feminism. Both types of advertisements avoid deep-seated gender issues and address women’s self-confidence and empowerment primarily through individual behavior, a strategy that, while effective in the short term, may exacerbate gender inequality in the long term [10].

4.2. Key Characters

Table 3: Statistical Analysis of Character Images

Category	Identity of Advertising Figures					Gender of Advertising Figures		Age of Advertising Figures				
	Ordinary Person	Celebrity	Internet Influencer	Expert	No Figure	Male	Male	Under 20	20-30 years old	30-40 years old	40-50 years old	Above 50 years old
Image Advertisement	2(15.4%)	5(38.4%)	3(23.1%)	3(23.1%)	0(0%)	1(9.1%)	10(90.9%)	-	4(30.7%)	3(23.1%)	3(23.1%)	3(23.1%)
Product Advertisement	3(30%)	6(60%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	1(10%)	4(44.4%)	5(55.6%)	-	4(44.4%)	5(55.6%)	0(0%)	0(0%)

The characters portrayed in advertisements can be categorized into five groups: ordinary people, celebrities, internet influencers, experts and no characters. Celebrities dominate image ads (38.4%), followed by online influencers and experts (23.1% each) and ordinary people (15.4%). Product ads relied even more on celebrities at 60%, generalists at 30%, and a small number of ads without characters. This diversity of casting reflects L’Oréal’s philosophy of “raising awareness of the diversity of beauty” and breaking down stereotypes of female identity. The extensive use of celebrities in both types of advertisements creates the phenomenon of “consumer idol”, where the positive image and reputation of celebrities are transferred to the brand through the “halo effect”, influencing consumer aesthetics and consumption behavior [11].

At the same time, the addition of ordinary people, network influencers and experts enriches the form of advertising. While ordinary people reduce advertising costs and shorten the distance between brands and consumers, online influencers and experts show women's achievements in various fields and portray diverse social roles. According to the analysis in Table 3, the proportion of women in image ads and product ads is 90.9% and 55.6%, respectively, after excluding characterless samples. As a representative of female empowerment advertisements, L'Oréal emphasizes female dominance and refuses to objectify them as sex objects. Although the proportion of male images is lower than that of women, the proportion of male spokespersons in product advertisements is 44.4%, which is almost the same as that of women. This trend challenges the traditional notion of women as objects of gaze. By introducing male images, L'Oréal not only expands its market, but also challenges and reshapes gender stereotypes [12]. In addition, Table 3 shows that in L'Oréal's product advertisements, the age of the characters is concentrated in the 20-30 (44.4%) and 30-40 (55.6%) age groups, which represent the main consumer groups, are economically independent and drive the cosmetics market. In the image ads, there is a more even distribution of characters aged 20 and above, with a slightly higher proportion of 20-30 years old, reflecting the brand's vitality and the potential for women's development, while women aged 30 and above convey maturity and credibility, enhancing the brand's image of "reliability". This is consistent with L'Oréal's philosophy of "fearing no age" and "increasing awareness of the diversity of beauty" [13]. There are no images of people under the age of 20 in the advertisements because L'Oréal avoids working with underage influencers and because this group has a lower purchasing power and less investment in advertising.

4.3. Narrative Structure

As shown in Table 4, advertisements are categorized into three types in the narrative dimension: narrative perspective, narrative angle, and narrative grammar. Image advertisements and product advertisements exhibit distinct biases and differences in these three aspects.

Table 4: Statistical Analysis of Narrative Dimensions

Category	Narrative Perspective			Narrative Angle				Narrative Grammar	
	First-Person	Second-Person	Third-Person	Omniscient	Advertiser	Audience	Product	Surface Structure	Deep Structure
Image Advertisement	7(70%)	0(0%)	3(30%)	1(10%)	1(10%)	8(80%)	-	0(0%)	10(100%)
Product Advertisement	0(0%)	3(30%)	7(70%)	2(20%)	7(70%)	1(10%)	-	7(70%)	3(30%)

In image-based advertisements, the narrative perspective primarily employs the first person (70%) and the third person (30%). First-person narration tells stories of growth and choices from a female self-perspective, enhancing emotional resonance and highlighting women's self-awareness and social value. This aligns with the post-feminist ideals of confidence and independence, emphasizing the consistency between unique female images and brand values. In contrast, product advertisements more commonly use third-person narration (70%), presenting product functions from an observer's viewpoint to maintain brand authority. Additionally, the use of second-person narration shortens the distance to the audience, enhancing personalization and fostering trust in the product. This narrative strategy aligns with "commodity feminism," emphasizing self-enhancement through products to satisfy individual needs and cultivate personal confidence and independence [14].

In terms of narrative angles, the "omniscient" perspective provides a comprehensive narration; the "advertiser" perspective communicates with consumers in the voice of the advertiser; the "audience" perspective unfolds the narrative from the consumer's standpoint; and the "product" perspective highlights product features through personification. Image advertisements primarily adopt the

“audience” perspective, while product advertisements tend to favor the “advertiser” perspective. Both occasionally utilize the “omniscient” perspective, but the “product” perspective is not observed in the samples. In image advertisements, the “audience” narration is warm and natural, evoking emotional resonance and bridging the gap with the audience. Meanwhile, product advertisements clearly showcase product advantages and usage scenarios through the “advertiser” perspective, effectively communicating product selling points.

The narrative syntax of image advertisements mainly emphasizes deep structure, focusing on diverse identities, confidence, independence, and brand value. In the process of accepting brand ideals, consumers gain both external and spiritual satisfaction, forming meaningful connections with the products [13]. In contrast, product advertisements follow a surface structure that directly demonstrates product effects. The superficial structural logic of “seeking” and “possessing” aligns with consumer needs, with the narrative syntax frequently featuring “seeking” and “possessing” in the advertising samples.

5. Similarities and Differences in the Expression of Feminism in Image and Product Advertisements

5.1. Similarities

Both image and product ads break away from the traditional idealized image of women by showcasing a diverse range of female characters, including different ages, skin colors, body types, occupations, and styles. Models are no longer limited to standard body types, and women of all appearances use the products with confidence, reflecting acceptance and respect for diversity. By showing women’s independence and self-worth, these ads challenge the stereotypes of the male gaze, avoiding the use of the female body as a means of attracting men and eliminating excessive body exposure and sexual innuendo. Instead, they engage audiences through emotion, storytelling and values, shifting the focus to women’s inner qualities and brand values [15]. Product ads emphasize product efficacy and practical benefits for women, highlight women's autonomy and capabilities, and challenge traditional gender stereotypes. L’Oreal actively promotes positive women's images and values to enhance brand image and promote gender equality, and this win-win strategy is worth learning from. However, advertising overly relies on the celebrity effect, and image advertising conveys role models of female autonomy through celebrities, influencers and experts, which may lead audiences to focus more on celebrities than on brand values. Product advertisements, on the other hand, directly utilize the influence of celebrities to promote products, which enhances market competitiveness but may lead to insufficient emphasis on product function and quality, with consumers focusing more on the appearance and personal charisma of the spokesperson than on the efficacy of the product.

5.2. Differences

Image ads demonstrate a higher social level and a broader scope in feminist expression, emphasizing women's social roles, professional achievements and empowerment, thereby portraying a diverse image of women and conveying society's awareness of women's autonomy. These advertisements go beyond external beauty, focusing on expressing the important value of women in various fields and promoting the progress of gender equality in society. In contrast, the expression of feminism in product ads is more superficial, centering on commodity feminism, focusing on women’s personal choices and self-care, emphasizing the realization of personal autonomy and fulfillment through specific products, and concentrating on the product's function and its positive impact on women’s lives. They convey women’s empowerment primarily through the act of consumption for self-affirmation. In terms of consumerism combination, image advertisements relatively downplay the shadow of consumerism, focusing on demonstrating women's non-material independence and self-

fulfillment, emphasizing social and professional achievements, and staying more on the spiritual level. In contrast, product advertisements are closely integrated with consumerism, highlighting the efficacy of products, directly linking female empowerment to consumption behavior, and conveying the concept of “self-improvement through consumption”[16]. In terms of the diversity of aesthetic standards, L’Oréal’s image ads are particularly prominent, featuring women of different races, cultures and age groups, showing their independence and social roles. This diversity breaks traditional stereotypes and reflects the brand's recognition of the value of different women. Although product ads also try to feature women of different body types and appearances, the focus is still primarily on the product and technology. Notably, the presence of male figures in product advertisements challenges traditional gender roles, enhances social inclusiveness on gender issues, triggers public reflection and promotes the spread of feminist ideals.

6. Conclusion

An analysis of the image and product advertisements released by L'Oréal in China after 2021 shows that the brand successfully breaks the monolithic nature of the traditional image of women by conveying diverse and inclusive aesthetic standards, which is in line with the trend of post-feminist development and mitigates stereotypes from a male perspective. In addition, the two types of ads differ significantly in their expression of feminism: image ads emphasize women's self-confidence and individualism in all social spheres, while product ads combine consumer behavior with female empowerment through commodity feminism. Although this study provides some important findings, there are limitations. The sample is limited to post-2021 advertisements, which may not fully reflect the evolution of advertising strategies. In addition, the specific effects of advertising on consumer psychology in different cultural and social contexts were not explored in depth, and systematic research on different gender roles was lacking. Future research should expand the time span and sample scope to obtain more comprehensive conclusions, and explore the effects of gender expression in advertisements on different groups, and conduct quantitative analyses to assess the long-term effects of advertisements on consumer psychology and behavior. At the same time, attention should be paid to the interaction of diverse roles in advertisements to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the expression of female empowerment advertisements in the context of globalization and its potential impact.

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