

From market might to meaningful empowerment: Rethinking China's Female Consumption

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Abstract:

In recent years, with the progress of society and the enhancement of women's empowerment, Chinese women's consumption power has shown explosive growth, and they have made significant improvements in education, occupation, income, wealth, etc., and demonstrated strong purchasing power and decision-making power in various fields. This thesis explores the transformation of Chinese women's consumption from being dominated by market forces to becoming empowered by meaning. Analyzing women's awakening awareness of their rights in consumption, including the guidance of consumption concepts and targeted strategies of product design and marketing, reveals the market's strong influence on women's consumption. By studying the changes in women's consumption, we will explore how women express themselves, pursue values, and realize social identity through consumption. The study uses case studies and statistics to comprehensively analyze the impact of this shift and the changing roles of women in the consumption process, as well as to raise issues that are often overlooked, to provide theoretical references for better-transforming women's growing economic influence into real social empowerment.

Keywords: Female Purchasing Power; Empowerment; Gender Differences; Marketing.

1. Introduction

The Programme of Action adopted by the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women lists women and the economy as one of the 12 critical areas of concern. Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in the economic sphere is

a development strategy and a code of conduct for the international community, as well as an essential foundation for implementing the basic state policy of gender equality in China. In recent years, the wave of feminism in China has become more and more violent. More and more Chinese women have not only recognized the discrimination and oppression

of patriarchal society against themselves and the female community as a whole but have also begun to take the initiative to pay attention to the feminist media and issues and to participate in the propaganda of feminism actively, and in the defense and struggle for women's rights and interests^[1].

In May 2024, Blue Moon, a well-known laundry detergent brand in China, released a Mother's Day advertisement with the tagline: "Make laundry easier for moms." What seemed harmless praise of the product's efficiency quickly spiraled into a public relations crisis. Social media erupted with women's calls to boycott the brand because of its outdated gender stereotypes. Under public pressure, the company apologized and removed the ad. Many women saw the successful boycott as a victory for women in influencing market trends and corporate strategy.

Increasing education and workforce participation have made more Chinese women the primary household earners. This shift empowers nearly 400 million female consumers aged 20 to 60 in China to contribute 10 trillion to annual consumer spending. As consumption has evolved beyond mere economic activity into a key avenue for women to express their independence and modernity, it becomes essential to examine the broader implications of this trend. Does embracing consumerism empower women by enhancing their economic and social autonomy, or does it reinforce existing stereotypes and impose new constraints?

2. Chinese Women's Consumption Characteristics

As the network economy continues to flourish, women are gradually becoming the leaders of new social fashions, and the consumer behaviors and styles they generate are becoming progressively more diverse. According to Georg Zimmer, 'Fashion is an imitation of established patterns, which satisfies the need for social conditioning; it provides a universal rule that turns individual behaviour into a model^[2]. But at the same time it satisfies the demand for difference, change, individuality.' Women's multiple aesthetics and values determine the diversity of their consumption behavior, and at the same time, this characteristic is also their unique way of pursuing individuality and expressing themselves.

One prominent characteristic of Chinese female consumption is the trend of hedonistic and self-indulgent spending. Data from the 2022 China Women's Consumption Report^[3] indicates that categories such as travel, wellness, and high-end beauty products have witnessed notable growth. As CBNDData indicates, most unmarried women

have an extremely high demand for self-satisfying commodities related to beauty and skincare. Paying for leisure activities, luxury goods, and personal care products has been regarded as a form of self-reward. More underlined is the 2024 Women's Quality of Life Trend Report: sixty-four percent of women chase a relaxed and indulgent life. Thirty-one percent hold a consumption attitude for mainly emotional value, focusing on the consumption experience. Only 44 percent are rational in their consumption perspective.

Buying for beauty and emotional consumption are still prominent features of contemporary women's consumption behavior. Emerging women have a high degree of acceptance of new things. Still, because their consumption concepts are not entirely set, under the influence of new social trends, grass-raising celebrities, and the fan economy, women are prone to emotional consumption, i.e., purchasing goods that do not match their own, to gain social acceptance and the admiration of others through consumption. But as Feathers comments on female consumption, 'it oscillates between order and disorder, status consciousness and playful fantasies, desire for emotional control and dissolution of control, rational calculation and hedonism.' Female consumers are not a black-and-white group; their consumption choices also show more diverse colors. In the pursuit of pleasing themselves, they are more cautious, rational, and selective in their consumption while also considering the product's actual value. So far, female consumers no longer quickly pay for 'pseudo-needs,' and their consumption motives need to align with the values and have practical value. As a group of people whose sensibility and rationality are intertwined, under the shell of focusing on the product's value, female users will also consider the price, quality, functionality, and actual needs of the product to ensure that their purchases are wise and economically reasonable.

Many women proudly display their excessive spending on social media in coffee shops, restaurants, leisure activities, lipsticks, cosmetics, and handbags. They claim that it is a way to treat "treating themselves." This self-focused spending is widely admired because it represents breaking free from the traditional image of women being family-centered and relying on their husbands for material fulfillment. However, excessive hedonic consumption could create financial strain and trap women in a cycle of earning and spending. While carefree spending can bring instant pleasure, this "exquisite poverty" lifestyle often limits long-term financial freedom. Research shows that, compared to men, women have higher levels of brand commitment, hedonic consumption, and impulse buying. Consequently, women tend to have less financial investment, fewer real estate assets, and smaller savings, which

can potentially risk their future life.

The Blue Book of Women's Life 2023 presents us with a survey on the consumption status of women and families in urban China (Fig. 1). Among the significant expenditures of women and their families, children, housing, and health are the top choices, while traveling is on the rise, and there are various ways to travel. Regarding chasing new consumer trends, 'shopping with careful budgeting,' 'online shopping/group buying at home,' and 'buying green energy-saving home appliances and environmentally friendly furniture' ranked the top three. In terms

of consumer investment, the surveyed women preferred low-risk products. Regarding consumer rights protection, the surveyed women and their families have generally encountered online consumption problems and are committed to protecting their legitimate rights and interests^[4]. From the survey results, healthy consumption is favored among women, green consumption is more environmentally friendly, quality consumption is better, brand consumption is more respected, online consumption is more convenient, and consumption investment is more cautious.

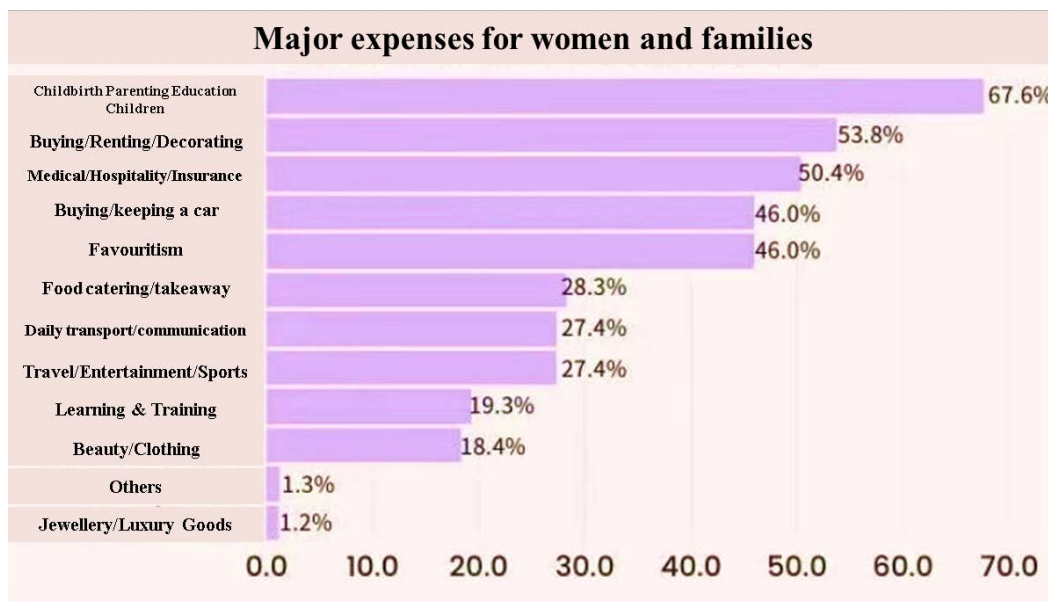


Fig. 1 Survey on the Consumption Situation of Women and Households in Urban China

Lefebvre said, 'Consumption is both the devil of woman and her liberator, providing her with a place to act, to have access to the public sphere and to have power.' The first wave of the feminist movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries focused on the fight for women's right to vote, education, and work^[5]. The battle for women's right to work meant that women could earn an economic income and be economically independent. Among the more authoritative global indicators for measuring gender equality, the labor participation rate significantly indicates how many women are engaged in paid work in the labor market. All of these illustrate the importance of the economy to women's independence. The most direct manifestation of economic freedom is the ability to consume and buy what women want, including the independence women wish. So, the ability to consume is part of women's power.

3. Female consumption penetration

Traditionally, there have been apparent gender differences

in consumer habits. Instead of machines, tools, and electronic devices, women tend to invest more in home appliances, accessories, and other products that serve their appearance and household^[6]. But recently, women have started buying things that were once considered masculine. The diversification of women's identities in today's society has contributed to the diversification of women's consumption. Nowadays, 'her consumption' is no longer limited to traditional women's products but to the non-sexist 'ta consumption.' Data show that in 2022, more than 60% of female fitness consumers will be women, and women's investment in sports will continue to rise; in 2023, the number of female car buyers will increase to 38.08%. In industries with a high concentration of men, such as automobiles, alcohol, sports, and e-sports, the proportion of female users continues to increase^[7]. With the increase of female users who love sports, women's sports apparel brands represented by Lululemon and others are emerging. For example, with the rising demand for women to buy cars in the automotive market, more and more car companies are launching models focusing on women.

Female car buyers focus on 'value' and 'cost-effective.' Some brands launch more good-looking and practical car products (Fig. 2). For example, Chery launched a small ant - -charm, QQ ice cream - peach joy, two new women's cars (Fig. 3), the use of cute and dynamic styling design

and beautiful color scheme, intelligent central control LCD screen, 360 panoramic image, BSD blind spot monitoring, and other configurations to enhance the safety and maneuverability, more in line with the needs of women.



Fig. 2 Top 10 TGI share of active female users of new energy vehicle lines in 2024

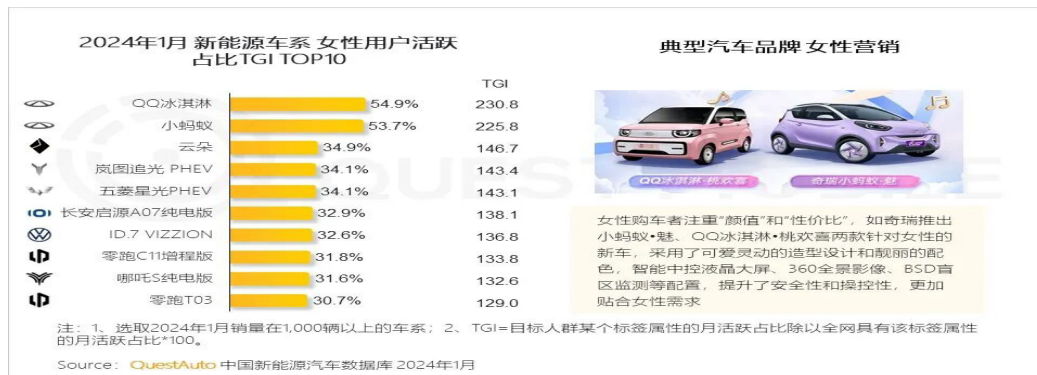


Fig. 3 Women's Marketing for Typical Brands

In 2014, the number of female drivers in China has surged to 160 million by 2022. Women's share in new car purchases rose to 34 percent in 2022. This growth rate surpasses their male counterparts in the same age group. In the first 27 minutes following the launch of Chinese smartphone giant Xiaomi's latest car model, the SU7 received over 50,000 orders. Within just over ten days, pre-orders surged to 88,063 units. The feminine characteristics of its design are seen as the key to winning over customers: 28 percent of Xiaomi SU7 buyers were women, with predictions suggesting female customers could make up 40 to 50 percent of future sales. In the gaming industry, female gamers in China surged from less than 80 million in 2013 to 290 million in 2018. That year, female

gamers contributed to a market consumption of 49.04 billion yuan, marking a 13.8 percent year-on-year increase. Furthermore, QuestMobile's 2024 Mobile Gaming Industry Insights Report revealed that by February 2024, women made up 51.3 percent of potential gaming users. Sports consumption among women has also seen notable growth. Women's average spending on sports reached 6,362 yuan in 2021, nearly a 50 percent increase from 2020. They are now more inclined than men to purchase training sessions and have become the primary consumers of home fitness equipment like dumbbells that were once male-oriented. While Chinese men have been traditionally viewed as the primary purchasers of luxury goods, mainly due to the practice of gifting to business partners and government

officials, Chinese women are now catching up in luxury consumption. They make up over 50 percent of this market segment today, compared to the 20 percent share a decade ago.

Stereotype-breaking consumption has opened new opportunities for producers to innovate and cater to a more diverse audience. It also given rise to a wave of advertising campaigns that cloak themselves in a feminist narrative. Consumption is often elevated to a virtuous, identity-defining behavior—a consumerist „badge“ of female empowerment.

4. Virtual empowerment on the Internet

The rise of cyberfeminism is changing women's 'share of voice' on the Internet and women's consumer behavior. Unlike traditional business, even a homemaker who does not leave her home can connect with the world anytime in the Internet era, greatly enhancing her ability to obtain information and speak out. Compared with the traditional era of 'men dominating the outside world and women dominating the inside world,' women's influence on business in the Internet era has been dramatically enhanced. From the perspective of cyberfeminism, the Internet will bring virtual empowerment to women, and it is believed that the Internet can become a tool to resist the oppression of the patriarchal system.

The British weekly magazine *The Economist* once pointed out that 'the new economic growth will not come from China, India or the Internet, it will be driven by women', highlighting the importance of women in driving economic development. Regarding shopping consumption, data from a research report by Guotai Junan show that nearly 75 percent of household consumption decisions in China are led by women. The data in the China Women's Consumption Survey Report is consistent with this. The report also points out that women in China are a consumer group with substantial spending power, especially in clothing, personal care, beauty, and other aspects.

Even so, many data reports on women's economic impact still do not reflect women's contribution. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 73% of unpaid work (including childcare, shopping, and housework) in China is done by women. The proportion of women in unpaid work is even higher in countries such as South Korea, Japan, and India, where it reaches 83%, 84%, and 85 percent, respectively, or even higher.

Internet commerce is often connected to women, and social networks, in particular, directly connect to female

consumption. Therefore, it is usually much better for business organizations to rely on female community traffic than male communities. Rebtel, a global voice services company, surveyed 2,361 Americans over 18 about their forms of contact and found that women preferred to use social networks to communicate with family, friends, and co-workers. In contrast, men preferred to use voice calls to do so. Women's reliance on social networks has led to a high conversion rate, high frequency, and more significant business value for women's communities. Take Pinduoduo as an example; it is a business model based on 'social traffic,' the leading driving group is the female community. The Penguin research platform released the first 'Pinduoduo user research report,' which shows that the main population of Pinduoduo, women, accounted for 70.1%, second only to Vipshop's 70.9%.

5. Commodity Feminism

Commodity feminism is a pun derived from Marx's concept of 'commodity fetishism.' On the one hand, it refers to the appropriation of feminist ideas and symbols for commercial use, whereby their political connotations are erased in activities such as advertising and marketing and ultimately presented to the public as commodities; on the other hand, the term also implies feminism itself is being trafficked as a commodity in a consumer society^[8]. For example, traditional advertising and marketing have been fiercely criticized by feminist thinking for their sexism, male gaze, etc. In response to this, a new advertising and marketing strategy has been created --Instead of the traditional image of women, adverts featured the image of the 'new woman' as independent, free, in control of her own body, and equal to men. That is naturally a form of empowerment on the surface; however, since the fundamental purpose of advertising is to promote the sale of goods, such strategies also have their way of attracting women to buy goods. They promote the idea that women's bodies are in their own hands, that they are a source of pleasure and power for themselves, and that this pleasure and empowerment is realized through purchasing commodities with corresponding symbols. In this marketing strategy, although women are somewhat free from the male gaze, they become the gazers of their gaze, and this self-fetishization can still lead to feelings of inferiority and self-loathing in the face of countless advertisements for make-up, skincare, diets, and so on^[9].

Because commodity feminism also emphasizes women's right to control and enjoy their bodies, it has been able to flourish in a liberal feminist culture. However, the very nature of commodity feminism's attachment to the capitalist system of production means that it cannot, in and of

itself, truly change the patriarchal social structure of women's oppression. Instead, it shifts women's focus from feminist social goals to their lifestyles, depoliticizing them and removing them from concern for social, economic, and political inequalities. Inequalities in relations. As Gill

argues, based on Jameson's notion of 'cannibalism': '[Advertising and marketing] may wear the mask of feminism today because it helps to promote itself, but it could well wear a different mask tomorrow.'



Fig. 4 Woman on the cover of the women's magazine, Ms., wearing a cultural shirt with the words ,This is what a feminist looks like.'

As China's female consumer base continues to grow and the concept of feminism spreads widely in today's society, domestic enterprises and advertisers have begun to adopt the strategy of commodity feminism to promote their products. The most naked manifestations of this are undoubtedly the 'Goddess Day,' 'Queen's Day,' and other artificial commercial shopping festivals with the prefix 'female,' which ostensibly highlight the supremacy of women, as well as the March 7 festival, which is prevalent on university campuses^[10]. E-commerce platforms and retailers hope that these festivals will make 'women feel justified in consuming and reduce their psychological burdens,' thus promoting the sales of goods. However, many feminists have criticized these festivals for their explicit marketing and objectification of women. They denounce these festivals as discriminatory and objectifying against women, overly commercialized, and losing the connotation of pursuing gender equality and praising working women that traditional women's festivals such as the In-

ternational Working Women's Day on March 8 have.

Under these circumstances, there is still a long way to go in further developing the feminist movement in China. Progressive feminists in China need to re-politicize the depoliticized women who are mired in consumerism. Women's emancipation cannot be achieved through consumption alone but by promoting social, economic, and political change.

6. Feminist Development Dilemma

According to the previous analysis, several types of female groups formed under the influence of the Internet may have different impacts on business. For example, we can categorize them according to the degree of their pursuit of feminism into groups that use the Internet to fully display their individuality, groups that objectively pursue equal rights for men and women, groups that seek independence, and groups that are more extreme in their fem-

inism. Although such a categorization is not refined, it is still instructive for us to analyze the resulting commercial impact.

Women who use the Internet to display their individuality fully can be categorized as “pleasing others” and “pleasing themselves.” For the former, one of the primary purposes of their consumption is to please other people and gain their “likes” and “respect.” They constantly “show” their Chanel perfumes, Hermes scarves, LV bags, luxury cars, and houses on social media. In this way, on the one hand, they win the envy of the same sex in exchange for psychological satisfaction; on the other hand, they use this to obtain the male group’s affirmation of their value. Although some of them have the financial strength to spend on high-end consumption, they still depend on the affirmation of the male group in their hearts. They often take the consumption of luxury goods as a kind of “symbol” to obtain other people’s affirmation and ignore the actual use value of the goods.

The emergence of new trends in female consumption in Chinese society is tied to feminist influence. However, the typical characteristics of the “Her Economy” still reflect the developmental dilemma of feminism—struggling between advancing autonomy and traditional expectations. Hedonistic and self-indulgent spending has given women a sense of independence and stimulated their desires for higher-quality lifestyles. Paradoxically, some women still pin their aspirations for high consumption on marriage rather than self-sufficiency. The market has packaged luxury consumption as a rigid demand to cater to the “Symbol” consumption psychology of this female group, t, which has stimulated the rise of the global luxury market. But at the same time, “Shanzhai” luxury goods, high imitation goods, etc., are also welcomed by many women; the counterfeit market is also very prosperous, and replacing the use of symbolic value has become routine. With the help of this kind of goods, they make themselves stand out among many women to obtain a stronger male identity and value affirmation. On second-hand rental platforms, some young women co-rent luxury hotels, share high-end cars, and borrow designer bags, carefully curating a socialite persona. Their main objective is to appeal to more affluent men and thus improve their odds of “marrying up.”

Women’s pre-marital home purchases have garnered significant attention as a challenge to traditional stereotypes. In 2021, 82 percent of women plan to buy a home in the next five years, while 40 percent aim to be owner-occupiers within two years. Many are motivated by a desire for independence and security. Qi Sun, a 34-year-old tech employee, states, “My friend said that it could be easier to buy a house than to find a boyfriend, but when I bought

a house, I started to feel that getting married isn’t so important anymore.” Owning property symbolizes financial autonomy and reinforces their independent identity. According to a Beike Real Estate Research Institute report, women comprise nearly 48.65 percent of all homebuyers. More real estate developers are focusing on designing independent living spaces tailored to single women’s unique needs and personal preferences.

However, it can sometimes lead to irrational real estate investments. Some women fixated on being property owners as a testament to their independence and purchased homes in remote areas with little potential for appreciation or practical use. These properties serve more as symbolic gestures rather than functional assets.

In contrast, there is another group of women who, in the context of the new era, are more interested in ‘self-pleasing’ consumption, pursuing consumption that highlights their individuality and taste without paying attention to what men or even people of the same sex think of them. As women’s social and economic status continues to rise, ‘self-centred’ consumption has become a new growth point in the female economy. However, while women’s consumption of ‘self-pleasing’ products is not active on the Internet and social media, as they are unwilling to display them to gain attention, their actual consumption power is not to be underestimated. They must grow more extensive and more prominent in pursuing true female empowerment.

A deeper exposure to feminist thinking has accompanied the growing consumer power of the domestic female population. Feminist organizations and media outlets in China know this and have published several articles criticizing it. However, because they are deeply influenced by consumerism, the need to use commodities to express their feminist identity, and their economic difficulties, these feminist organizations and self-publishing media have often paradoxically expressed their non-negativity towards commodified feminism and have even taken the initiative to use their feminist banner for advertising and marketing.

7. Conclusion

With the awakening of women’s consciousness, Chinese women’s consumption has shifted from market power to meaningful empowerment. Chinese women’s consumption has shown diversification, online, and self-pleasing trends. These trends reflect the improvement of women’s economic status and the change in consumption concepts, providing enterprises with more business opportunities and market competitiveness. Women’s consumption will continue to be diversified and personalized, and women will also play a more influential role in the consumption

field, achieving higher levels of self-worth and social value. However, material ownership is not necessarily the same as empowerment. Seeking independence through consumption can lead to new forms of constraint. Simply celebrating women's growing market influence risks overlooking potential contradictions, such as reinforcing certain ideals through conspicuous consumption or positioning empowerment as being achieved primarily through consumption. Adequate progress requires collective action and a more significant market focus on meeting the deeper needs of women consumers to ensure that women's growing economic clout translates into real social empowerment rather than superficial independence.

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