



Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:
The 26th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

THE MATERIALITY OF TRUST: BEAUTY CONSUMPTION OF YOUNG CHINESE WOMEN THROUGH E-COMMERCE LIVE-STREAMING

Fan Xiao
University of Amsterdam

Growing up with China's rapid economic expansion and globalization, young Chinese women (aged under 35) living in urban cities found them facing an increasingly consumerist environment, with advanced media-commerce system that promotes certain ideas of womanhood and beauty ideals to incite beauty consumption. This study critically examines how young urban Chinese women negotiate consumerist beauty knowledge with needs of self-care and class-specific consumption. In this process, digital media plays a central in the circulation of beauty care information and gradually converge with retailing platforms. With multimodal analysis and in-depth interview, this study focuses on the followers of Li Jiaqi, China's most influential beauty e-commerce streamer, to explores the gendered, consumerist Chinese beauty culture, which deeply integrates with media-commerce platforms. Findings from this study suggest that the social construction of "beauty care" is an important device for young women to imagine and practice maturity, personal safety, and class status, displaying a dialectic relationship between body anxiety and feminist awareness.

Young women in the current study, aged under 35, constitute the "post-90s" generation (i.e., those who were born after 1990 and before 2000). The 1990s were marked by the end of the Cold War and China's strong ambition for globalization. In 1993, the Chinese government formally endorsed the construction of a "socialist market economy," which means an all-rounded embrace of the capitalist system, privatization of enterprises, and the full bloom of consumer culture. Compared with the previous generations, post-90s are immersed in a fast-growing consumer culture, with increasing varieties of living and cultural commodities produced domestically or imported from other countries (Zhao & Murdock, 1996). The flourishing of more entertainment-oriented television and advertising in the 1990s nurtured a younger generation with ready acceptance of consumerist values (Paek & Pan, 2004) and the symbolic construction between consumption, identity, and the idea of the "good life" (Zhao & Murdock, 1996).

The pursuit of consumerism in post-socialist China is deeply intertwined with the social imaginary of class stratification as a result of economic reform. In his conceptualization of habitus, Pierre Bourdieu argues that class distinction is not a matter of conscious learning. Rather, it is acquired through socialization, a form of "knowing how" without

Suggested Citation (APA): Xiao, F. (2025, October). *The materiality of trust: Beauty consumption of young Chinese women through e-commerce live-streaming*. Paper presented at AoIR2025: The 26th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Niterói, Brazil: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:
The 26th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

"knowing that" (Bourdieu, 1984; Lovell, 2000). This idea focuses upon "the body," in the sense that the embodied subject displays both high competence and loyalty to forms of life that have become enrolled (Shove & Pantzar, 2005). In her analysis of Western young women in the 1980s, Angela McRobbie (2011) provides two reasons for the emergence of neoliberal consumerism in the post-Fordist regime: 1) the increasing employment of women has granted them "new disposable income" (p. 67); 2) the expansion of higher education has offered working-class women in Europe and the US with opportunities to work in administrative role in both public and private sectors. Thus, there is an imperative for these highly educated white-collar women to adopt a respectful identity to differentiate themselves from the lower-status working class (Skeggs, 1997). This social anxiety about class is captured and exaggerated by neoliberal consumerism which continuously allure young women to achieve a middle-class identity through consumption of beauty, cosmetics and fashion products (McRobbie, 2011).

Similar to their Western counterpart in the 80s, young Chinese women display interest in cosmetic consumption and body transformation, resulting from increasing personal income, but also the social anxiety of class stability. From socialist egalitarianism to a market economy, the increasing income gap and diminished socialist welfare in post-socialist China, such as the abolition of job assignment and the welfare package of housing, childcaring, medical care, retirement, and so on, fed into an anxiety of competitive job-seeking and the (in)ability of social upward mobility. This anxiety also nurtured a group of consumers who are eager to demonstrate class identity privilege through consumption. The imagination of social class is constituted by the consumption of specific cultural products and a converged depiction of young professionals living in urban cities (Hui, 2021). Previous studies of middle class Chinese indicate a popular *suzhi* discourse revolving around the acquisition of taste, educational qualifications, and cultural experiences (Liu, 2008; Song & Lee, 2010; Xie, 2021). Such discourse is largely insubstantial and instrumental, indicating different subcultures in the middle stratum competing for cultural superiority and class distinction (Anagnost, 2004, 2008), with the goal of transforming a "bare life" to the "quality life" that "actualises the 'potentiality' of the human body" (Xie, 2021, p. 157). *Suzhi* requires continuous self-assessment and self-cultivation of the neoliberal body, which holds a strong belief in self-efficacy and autonomy (Liu, 2008).

In their study of body image and acceptance of cosmetic surgery in China and the Netherlands, Wu et al., (Wu et al., 2020) found that body appreciation - namely



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:
The 26th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

“unconditional approval and respect of the body” (Avalos & Tylka, 2006) - was the strongest predictor of Chinese women’s acceptance toward cosmetic surgery, displaying a very different beauty perception from women in Western countries. A follow-up qualitative study (Wu et al., 2022) by the same research team argues that, while in Western countries body appreciation is understood as accepting one’s body and appearance as they are, Chinese women equate body appreciation with unreserved willingness to invest on beauty enhancement, including cosmetic surgery. This perfectionism in aesthetic self-making is also reflected in popular content shared by online fashion celebrities, who expose daily bodily practices and maintenance activities to present a systematically planned, monitored entrepreneurial self (Liao, 2021). The widespread use of beautifying apps and filtered cameras is also argued as a manifestation of this neoliberal post-feminist construction of female beauty (Peng, 2021). However, other research also hint that the use of cosmetics represents a more complicated scenario, in which women are able to create room for self-expression and construct multiple identities by strategically maneuver between conflicting requirements of the beauty ideal (Scelzo & Lerman, 2009).

Through comprehensive analysis of young urban Chinese women’s consumption through Li’s live-streaming, I argue that young Chinese women’s beauty consumption represents a specific nexus of self-empowerment, class aspiration, and celebrity culture. To young Chinese women, beauty care constitutes an important opportunity to explore personal style after the prolonged, highly competitive and disciplined period of secondary education. Beauty care is widely perceived as emancipatory practices of female adulthood. The importance of beauty care actualized itself as a system of knowledge to be acquired, from which young women derive senses of enjoyment and fulfillment as a “problem-solver” and “self-caretaker.” In this process, e-commerce live-streaming provides handy conduits for finding bargains with wide access to information and user-friendly interfaces. The multi-faceted beauty care knowledge also helped young consumers evaluate the quality of live-streaming and find reputable streamers. By implementing what I call “the materiality of trust,” e-commerce live-streaming pass the scrutiny of young female consumers and becomes their major consumption conduit, while reproducing class-specific imagination of female beauty.

References

Anagnost, A. (2004). The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi). *Public Culture*, 16(2), 189–208. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-2-189>



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:
The 26th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

- Anagnost, A. (2008). From 'Class' to 'Social Strata': Grasping the social totality in reform-era China. *Third World Quarterly*, 29(3), 497–519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590801931488>
- Avalos, L. C., & Tylka, T. L. (2006). Exploring a model of intuitive eating with college women. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(4), 486–497. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.53.4.486>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Hui, C. (2021). The Art of Useless: Fashion, Media, and Consumer Culture in Contemporary China. In *The Art of Useless*. Columbia University Press. https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.7312/hui-19248/html?_llca=transfer%3A4e9557171d807b4e80dcadc57ed1138f&_llch=0df77a47cdb627e3ab4cf95bc887d837691c4735df53fc0dbad6962664268045
- Liao, S. (2021). Wang Hong fashion culture and the postfeminist time in China. *Fashion Theory*, 25(5), 663–685. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1638158>
- Liu, F. (2008). Constructing the autonomous middle-class self in today's China: The case of young-adult only-children university students. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11(2), 193–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260701800746>
- Lovell, T. (2000). Thinking feminism with and against Bourdieu. *Feminist Theory*, 1(1), 11–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647000022229047>
- McRobbie, A. (2011). Reflections On Feminism, Immaterial Labour And The Post-Fordist Regime. *New Formations*, 70(70), 60–76. <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.70.04.2010>
- Paek, H.-J., & Pan, Z. (2004). Spreading Global Consumerism: Effects of Mass Media and Advertising on Consumerist Values in China. *Mass Communication and Society*, 7(4), 491–515. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327825mcs0704_7



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:
The 26th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

- Peng, A. Y. (2021). A techno-feminist analysis of beauty app development in China's high-tech industry. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 30(5), 596–608. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1929091>
- Scelzo, T., & Lerman, D. (2009). Little Emperors grown up: A case study of cosmetic usage. *Young Consumers*, 10(2), 110–119. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17473610910964697>
- Shove, E., & Pantzar, M. (2005). Consumers, producers and practices: Understanding the invention and reinvention of Nordic walking. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5(1), 43–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146954050505049846>
- Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of class and gender: Becoming respectable*. SAGE.
- Song, G., & Lee, T. K. (2010). Consumption, class formation and sexuality: Reading men's lifestyle magazines in China. *The China Journal*, 64, 159-0_5. <https://doi.org/10.1086/tcj.64.20749251>
- Wu, Y., Alleva, J. M., & Mulkens, S. (2020). Factor Analysis and Psychometric Properties of the Chinese Translation of the Acceptance of Cosmetic Surgery Scale. *Body Image*, 33, 244–256. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.03.009>
- Wu, Y., Mulkens, S., & Alleva, J. M. (2022). Body image and acceptance of cosmetic surgery in China and the Netherlands: A qualitative study on cultural differences and similarities. *Body Image*, 40, 30–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2021.10.007>
- Xie, K. (2021). The gendered construction of exemplary middle-class identity: The hegemony of chenggong (success). In *Embodying middle class gender aspirations: Perspectives from China's privileged young women* (pp. 155–198). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zhao, B., & Murdock, G. (1996). Young pioneers: Children and the making of Chinese consumerism. *Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 201–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389600490121>