

DOCTORAL THESIS

Encoding and decoding women's magazines: femininity construction in contemporary China

Lu, Nan

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses how Chinese young women relate their reading women's magazines to their self-representation and their self-construction of a feminine identity. The question is explored from two related perspectives: femininity as represented by the major international women's magazine titles in China and Chinese young women's interpretation of those magazines.

The study first examines the construction of femininity encoding in ten major titles of international women's magazines in mainland China through a quantitative content analysis of their covers and qualitative semiotic analysis, including both western-style and Japanese-style women's magazines. Generally speaking, international women's magazines provide an ordinary yet feminine femininity through their covers. All of them put great emphasis on fashion, providing resources for the external construction of femininity. The western style magazines also provide content related to the internal construction of femininity through resources. These are seldom mentioned in the Japanese style ones.

Examined through themes of body, fashion and feminism, the study reveals that in general, western style magazines present a more mature and sophisticated version of femininity. They represent a picture of women who are more confident with their body, and who adopt diverse strategies for managing their appearance. These women are endowed with a "can-do" nature and the ability to make decisions and take action independently. Women in Japanese style magazines, in contrast, are represented in a manner that is more childlike, innocent, and obedient.

This study further provides an alternative way to categorize international women's magazines in China with regard to the femininity they presented to reveal individual differences among the major titles.

The interpretation from the readers is collected through in-depth interviews with Chinese young women. In general there are two types of users. One type of users has acute awareness of the existence of the external resources for femininity construction in whatever form. These users were willing and able to identify, mobilize, and utilize those resources for their femininity construction. The second type of users displays no interest in women's magazines or alternative resources, and depends on their connections with information collectors to acquire the resources they needed for femininity construction.

However, most of the interviewees reveal a strong tendency to maintain a strong consistency in their self-presentation and self-identity as women, which is the identity-based decoding proposed in this study. The ideal of femininity defined by the interviewees concentrates on the internal qualities, such as individuality, competitiveness and activeness. Although they do indeed pay attention to the content of women's magazines related to such issues in order to locate resources for their self-presentation, the external feminine traits deployed by the magazines, are considered as non-essential and rejected as markers of their own femininity by most of the interviewees. The version of Chinese femininity reflected in this study, briefly speaking, is the de-feminization on the external level, and internalization of "can-do" and "doing" on the internal level.

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