Representation and performativity of whiteness in China

The case of foreign digital entrepreneurs

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CHAPTER 5

Chapter 5:

BEYOND BARBIE: REPRESENTATIONS OF WHITENESS IN CHINA'S DIGITAL ADVERTISING[15]

Introduction

When I started my anthropological research on Western businesses and entrepreneurs in China, memories of my work for a Shanghai advertising company flooded my mind. Over the course of two years, from 2017 to 2019, I was a graduate student intern responsible for identifying niches for Western brands and entrepreneurs to thrive in China. This entailed conducting interviews with Chinese consumers and subsequently crafting images and visual interpretations for our clients' advertising campaigns on China's social media platforms. During those two years at the company, I observed distinct differences in how Western brands demanded their advertising content.

One pivotal project that marked the inception of my broader research was an advertising campaign for a lipstick by a renowned French cosmetic brand in late 2018. A week before the product's launch into the Chinese market, the company's manager invited me to participate in an online event, a pilot campaign, specifying that I should wear clothes with touches of the color pink. Sensing my confusion, as this was my first official business event, the manager leaned in, lowered her voice, and said: "We want you to carry the product and smile. You can do the Barbie. That's all we need." Still perplexed, I sought clarification on the Barbie reference, only to be told, "You are the only Western employee we have here at the company—white with blue eyes, the perfect marketing for the products. You showcase it, and we, as

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Chinese, can sell it to our clients." I vividly recall delicately presenting the lipstick and offering an awkward smile on camera while my manager marketed the product. A week later the product gained approval and the company hired a well-known white model from France for the advertising campaign on various Chinese e-commerce platforms.

This approach to advertising in China reflected a common strategy where the white body was commodified to promote products. However, the lipstick did not achieve the anticipated success, particularly among young Chinese consumers. Online comments suggested that the advertisement lacked a deep understanding of China and criticized the repetitive use of white Western models instead of Chinese ones. Many called on Western brands to adopt a more nationalistic approach to branding, urging the incorporation of traditional Chinese elements, symbols, and designs into both the products and marketing campaigns.

While Turrow and McAllister (2009: 4) write that advertising is heavily involved in shaping consumer culture, which refers to the symbols and messages that people are exposed to regarding the goods and services they use, purchase, or consume, my research shows that consumers also shape advertising. An online article published recently by Bloomberg (2022), titled "China's Gen Z Has the Power to Make or Break Western Brands," focuses on that generation's swelling sense of nationalism, their preference for local brands, and their extra scrutiny of Western firms advertising products in China. The same year that the French lipstick campaign failed, China's advertising industry also began promoting Chinese cultural identity through brands eloquently translated as *guócháo* (国潮; meaning national wave or national trend in Mandarin). Its popularity then intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic when China closed its borders to foreign nationals. Chinese fashion brands in the last few years have embraced the *guócháo* movement, designing products that celebrate and promote Chinese

cultural identity. This shift includes replacing white models with Chinese ones and using the Chinese language exclusively, as opposed to English, for online product promotion. Subsequently, Western brands started to shift their online advertising campaigns towards China's Gen Z, who eschewed Western aesthetics in advertising.

This case study identifies multiple and contradictory structures of white racial formation and traces its representation by white Western people and companies through China's mainstream social media platforms. Delving into the representation of whiteness beyond big corporate campaigns, I focus on online ads for Western products created not only by famous western brands but also by white Western entrepreneurs who live and work in China. These entrepreneurs are promoting their products through their personal accounts on China's social media platforms mostly by using whiteness as a façade for successful branding. Although Dyer (1997: 37-8) states that the white subject is "a subject without properties," it still has a dominant position and serves as a mechanism for distinction. However, the ideal of whiteness portrayed in mainstream American advertising, which long acted as a vehicle of white supremacy (Shankar, 2019), is notably different than in China. In addition, while whiteness can remain largely invisible in white-dominated societies, it is very evident in places where non-white people predominate (Fechter 2005; Lan 2011; Leonard 2008, 2010b; López 2012; Lundström 2014). As such, and given the recent *guócháo* movement, this article offers new ways of conceptualizing Western brands' advertising campaigns in China, where media representations of whiteness are contested, reproduced, and performed.

Inspired by Nakamura's (2008: 14) theory of "digital racial formation," which aims to "parse the way that digital modes of cultural production and reception are complicit with" racial formation as an "ongoing process," this study investigates the visual practices used by Western

brands and entrepreneurs and their relation to whiteness. This paper opens up China's advertising landscape, where a rapidly changing consumer culture meets Western brands and entrepreneurs advertising their products within existing mass-mediated representations of whiteness. Thus, this study asks two interrelated research questions: How do Western brands and entrepreneurs adapt their advertising strategies in China to effectively reach and engage with Gen Z consumers? And in what ways are representations of whiteness integrated into the discourse(s) of online advertising?

In order to evaluate advertising campaigns on China's social media platforms, it is necessary to establish a dialogue between producers, such as entrepreneurs and advertising companies, China's branding scene, and racialization in the marketing realm. Rather than simplistically judging Western products and advertising campaigns as positive or negative, this study highlights the junctures through which Western brands demonstrate the significance of visual racialized practices on social media platforms as they evolve to align with the perspectives of China's Generation Z.

Gen Z, Nationalism, and Whiteness

China is a significant case for investigating the relationship between advertising campaigns and consumerist culture, mainly Gen Z (in Chinese, Z 世代 [Z shìdài] or 00 后 [00hòu]). Generation Z, the cohort referred to by demographers includes those who were born after the mid-1990s, has become a distinctive new consumer group and is characterized as a “digital native” generation. In China, Gen Z has a strong presence in the e-commerce market, with 70% reporting that they are open to purchasing items through social media (Pan 2017). In addition, those consumers are little interested in traditional retail, instead using their smartphones to pay attention to social media advertising, in the form of live streams, short videos, and key opinion

leaders's ("influencers") recommendations (Wei and Banjo 2019). Recently, the rise of artificial intelligence-generated content on e-commerce platforms has drawn attention to Western brands and businesses that create immersive experiences, which resonate with their target audience, such as Gen-Z (Dudarenok 2023). Social media platforms, such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), Xiaohongshu (China's answer to Instagram), and many other Chinese e-commerce platforms, foster consumers' interactions with brands' content and media presence. As Western brands eagerly eye the vast Chinese e-commerce market, young consumers display a strong sense of taste and preferences regarding the promotion of products.

Social, cultural, and political pressures can influence purchasing patterns and product preferences. Nationalistic sentiments about consumption began with China's economic expansion and the government's efforts to strengthen the promotion of local products alongside imported goods. After China had experienced decades of egalitarian and controlled consumption during the Cultural Revolution (Zhang 2017), it underwent a "consumer revolution" (Davis 2000, 2005). Zhang (2017:648) argues that, since China's economy "shifted from socialism to 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics after the economic reforms of 1978" and thus "Chinese consumption patterns include both Western and Chinese characteristics." Liya, born in 2002 in Shanghai, said to me: "*Guócháo* is not just a trend. It's how brands are shaping the new business industries in China. We, as consumers, we are proud for our culture and it's always satisfying to see Western brands giving a flavor of China to their products." In 2014, Chinese leader Xi Jinping further proposed "the transformation of Chinese products into Chinese brands" (Cogné 2023). China's nationalistic branding effectively influences Gen Z consumers to feel a genuine sense of pride in and an active relationship with their country, and Western brands attempt this too through *Guócháo*. As the sociologist and philosopher

Baudrillard (1996:199) writes: “Consumption is an active form of relationship (not only to objects but also to society and the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system.”

“*Guócháo*,” the movement toward rediscovering and redefining what is “made in China,” became a buzzword online among China's young generation. Chinese sportswear brands Li-Ning and Anta inaugurated the term in media campaigns featuring clothing with patriotic designs, such as simplified Chinese characters and the Chinese flag (Zhou 2021), and young Chinese consumers responded positively to these strategies. For example, Peng, born in 1998 in Shenzhen, said: “Many fashion trends in China were largely influenced by the West. And you can see that in the advertisements too. White models, big logos on t-shirts written in English, English songs in the background, and other small details too. However, my generation found beauty in our heritage and our traditions. So yeah, it’s now considered cool to embrace a “Chinese look,” even down to the packaging!”

In line with this, we can define *guócháo* and its constituent forms, such as branding and consumption, as a subtype of China's consumer nationalism. Castello and Mihelj (2018) distinguish two types of consumer nationalism: political consumer nationalism and symbolic consumer nationalism. Political consumer nationalism combines political criticism of another country or boycotting foreign products and encouraging domestic purchases to boost one’s own country's economy. Conversely, symbolic consumer nationalism draws attention to actions and speech that serve cultural goals rather than political ones. This includes promoting nationalism through the consumption of not only domestically produced items but also imported goods that weave in nationalist elements through their production and distribution process. Li and Whitworth (2023) contend that consumer nationalism is a hybrid of political and symbolic

consumer nationalism, rather than seeing them as distinct entities. My research finds that both types of consumer nationalism participate in acts of consumption. I agree with Li (2016), who argues that in China consumer nationalism is expressed mainly though media communication. My research found that the younger generation in China actively participates in the advertising digital landscape, utilizing their consumption preferences as a means of expressing their nationalistic sentiments. *Guócháo* thus also affects Western businesses' branding and advertising campaigns (Cogné, 2023), and this practice contributes to shaping whiteness as a commodification strategy.

A distinctive example of these dynamics occurred in January 2023, when Mattel, the American toy company that owns the iconic Barbie doll, collaborated with the Chinese haute couture designer Guo Pei to design a special edition Barbie doll for the Lunar Year, which was released worldwide and in Barbie's online store in China. Referencing the traditional Qing Dynasty court dress, Guo Pei created a matching satin top and skirt in royal blue, embroidered with ornate swirling dragons to symbolize luck, strength, and "the union of earthly elements," as she explained in an online post to advertise the product. The doll's hair is sleek and black, cut in a bob with bangs, and wears gold jewellery and shoes. This was Pei's third design collaboration Mattel: in 2022, she created two different dresses for Barbie. One of them was a reinterpretation of a Yellow Empress Dress and the second, designed specifically for the Lunar Year 2022, was an embroidered traditional Chinese red dress with golden phoenixes representing femininity and grace.

The release of these dresses and Barbies on China's e-commerce platforms received unparalleled attention from young Chinese consumers due to how Mattel adapted to the Chinese market, including its collaboration with a famous Chinese designer, the dolls' unique

clothing pieces with Chinese patterns, and the dark, short hairstyle, as Barbie usually is depicted as a white woman with long blond hair and blue eyes. However, the production and promotion of Barbie with Chinese characteristics and clothes can also raise questions about those designs, and about Mattel's attempt to produce a kind of difference and a sense of belonging in the Chinese market. DuCille's (1999:38) research on so-called ethnic Barbies shows that dolls that diverge from the stereotypical Barbie still reify a white standard of beauty: "Today Barbie dolls come in a rainbow coalition of colors, races, ethnicities, and nationalities, [but] all of those dolls look remarkably like the stereotypical white Barbie, modified only by a dash of color and a change of clothes." As in the case of the Chinese Barbie and other products made by Western brands and entrepreneurs in the country, whiteness does not inhere exclusively in the body but symbolically represents a system of dominance that encompasses factors like nationality, gender, location, and class. Particularly in China, whiteness merges with *guócháo* and acts as both as a motif of consumption for Western products and a reflection of otherness in the eyes of young Chinese consumers.

Representations of Whiteness in China

At one level, advertising is a communication strategy to creatively promote products, but it also is a way that race is constructed, negotiated, and presented. The body, with its phenotypic characteristics, serves as the core element for the discourse of race (Hall 2013, 1980). Representation is a signifying practice of racializing the other, according to Hall's (2013) study of the nuanced ways that the media not only presents images but also connotations about race and ethnicity.

The growing scholarship on advertising, branding, and race in China (Chen 2023; Kefala 2023; Mak 2007; Johansson 1999) is a significant backdrop to the present study. Scholars have

established that the advertising industry in China has been playing an essential role in producing and representing whiteness. The white body, as represented in advertisements by white models or white entrepreneurs, visually displays the commodification of whiteness. Still, Western fashion products are considered more fashionable and beautiful by Chinese consumers when they are associated with Western white models in their ads (Zhou and Belk 2004). The research presented here adds to understandings of whiteness as it is represented with the white body by tackling a relatively unexplored topic: the representation of whiteness as manifested in an immaterial form, as an invisible veil. In a more critical view of the structures of whiteness, the recognition of it as marked (visible) and unmarked (invisible) (Fujikawa 2008) reinforces the importance of the context of representation. On the one hand, corporeal whiteness is apparent (white bodies); on the other, it remains invisible (white supremacy and white norms). In centering this contradiction in the racialization of Western advertisements in China, this study considers whiteness a polysemic construction.

Prior scholarship on whiteness focused on white racial formation (Frankenberg 1993; Hage 2000; Hartigan 1999; Roediger 1992; Wekker 2016) and media representation of white hegemony (Bonnet 2000; Gabriel 1998; Dyer 1997), mainly in Western countries. Critiques of those studies point to their parochial outlook, suggesting new geographies to investigate how whiteness can be displaced (Ang et al. 2022; Nayak 2007; Wiegman 1999). Since race is a social construction and whiteness is a social and cultural process that holds a structural position, it can also be interrogated in different socio-political, cultural, and local contexts. China has become an emerging place for scholars to investigate the reconfiguration of whiteness and its changing power in the Chinese context.

Focusing on white racial formations, researchers have examined the experiences and positionality of Western white migrants in China. These studies highlight the conflation of whiteness with advantage and illuminate the disadvantages those migrants encounter in the country as foreign others (Kefala 2023; Kefala and Lan 2021; Ma 2021; Litman 2021; Camenish and Suter 2019; Lan 2022; Leonard 2019; Lehman 2014). Drawing from studies that emphasize the "territorially bounded nature of whiteness (Lan 2022; Lundström 2014), Lan (2022: 119) makes a "distinction between white privilege as a form of structural domination in Western societies and white-skin privilege as a form of embodied racial capital in China". Since whiteness in China does not hold structural dominance, social privilege and favorable treatment is largely attributable to white skin and Western appearance. Ma's (2023) study on the representation of whiteness in Chinese cinema in relation to Chinese nationalism, shows the multiplicity of whiteness mirroring the Chinese audience's nationalistic feelings in which white superiority is affirmed and questioned. Ma also argues that Chinese media play a role in contributing to racial ideologies concerning whiteness. Therefore, while whiteness "in China still benefits, to some extent, from white supremacist ideologies, structures, and practices embedded in global media, the neoliberal market economy, and consumer culture" (Lan 2022: 119), it is also marginalized.

While these scholars offer incisive assessments of the conflicting and complex social construction of whiteness in China, they have paid less attention to advertising and how it contributes to white racial formation. Moreover, racialization in digital media and technology suggests that offline power dynamics get reproduced online in retrogressive ways (Hobson 2008). To contextualize the meanings of whiteness and positioning them within the framework of current developments (Twine and Gallagher 2008), I use the case of China, focusing on the stereotype of Western brands and Western entrepreneurs, through the representation of

whiteness. Thus, the paper exemplifies how race is constructed and visually expressed through China's digital advertising and consumption.

Methodology

This study is part of an ongoing online ethnographic research project from 2020 to 2023 that examines the racial and gender performances of foreign digital entrepreneurs and their businesses in China. In the context of the production and promotion of Western brands in China, in which the representation of whiteness is increasingly equated with branding techniques to attract consumers, entrepreneurs' marketing strategies seem essential to analyze the construction of whiteness in China's media. My in-depth analysis for this paper follows an inductive pattern, which involves building meaning from the rich descriptions found in research participants' narratives (Lapan et al. 2012), and a careful reading of my data and the development of my argument.

When seeking to analyze people's experiences in producing or interpreting media content such as advertising campaigns, methods such as interviews and participant observation produce data sufficient to generate insights. Since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted my on-site ethnographic research in China due to travel restrictions for foreign nationals, I turned my focus to digitally mediated practices, conducting online interviews with Western entrepreneurs, young Chinese consumers, and advertising companies. Finally, I analyzed Western advertising campaigns on China's social media platforms, deploying a behind-the-scenes form of observation that helped me see how the advertising of Western brands in China is distributed to audiences online. As Lopes (2020: 20) states: "The way media are created and what happens behind the scenes then affect the representations we end up seeing on-screen."

For the Western research participants in this study, I contacted them through my network in Shanghai, Facebook, Instagram, and job portals like LinkedIn and WeChat (China's largest mobile app) and conducted interviews with 20 participants. They ranged in age from 20 to 38, and the interviews were conducted in English. This group of participants were from Europe or the United States, and all identified as white. They had all lived in China for the last six years, working in creative industries as fashion or jewellery designers, artists, craft makers, writers, and photographers.

In addition, to probe the characteristics of China's Gen Z consumers and the specific aesthetics they prefer from Western brands, I interviewed ten young Chinese consumers studying in Shanghai; all were in their mid-twenties. In addition, I was also in contact with people from the marketing departments of three Chinese advertising companies, to discuss the marketing strategies that famous Western brands choose to promote products in China.

The last step of my data collection was the visual and textual analysis of several Western brands on China's social media platforms, such as WeChat, Douyin, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu. I was looking to see if there were differences across platforms for, as Belk (2017: 40) argues: "Advertisements are targeted to different audiences, and audiences may form different interpretive communities, the members of which respond to particular ads in unique ways." Finally, textual analysis is an established strategy for studying race and the media. In-depth analyses of media work to comprehend the significance of racial representations by dissecting the general trends they have adopted and the intricacies of particular storylines, dialogue, scenes, or characterizations.

Research Findings

Western brands and the unbearable whiteness of advertising in China

One Saturday morning in September 2021, I received a video call from Ivan, a Chinese friend who lives in Shanghai. When I opened my camera, I saw Ivan running, and I could barely hear her as she asked, "Do you have time now to talk? I want you to see something." It took me a few minutes to understand what was happening, but I discerned that Ivan was in the city centre of Shanghai, trying to squeeze herself among many young Chinese standing in front of one of the city's wet markets. She explained that the previous night, she saw on several social media that Prada, the Italian luxury fashion brand, had created a spot in the Wuzhong market in Shanghai to market the Fall/Winter 2021 campaign, and she thought I'd be interested to see it as well. With the title "Feels like Prada," the campaign, which had occupied several building façades and stores in several cities worldwide, travelled to China for a two-week pop-up event. From the first day of the campaign's release, the wet market received hundreds of young Chinese and celebrities daily to purchase food products, such as vegetables and meat from different vendors inside the market, in wrapping paper and shopping bags with the Prada logo and take photographs inside the decorated Prada market stall. The campaign was quite different than previous ones, as it replaced white models with a physical space occupied by Chinese employees and businesses. After Ivan showed me the market and the products, I noticed the excitement on her face and the smiles she exchanged with other young Chinese consumers there, and she enthusiastically told me:

> It not only feels [like] Prada to me, but it also feels [like] China. Prada's aspiration to localize itself serves as an unprecedented invitation to our culture – a form of marketing we are encouraging other Western brands to adopt. Personally, I've grown tired of

> mainstream ads featuring exclusively white models. I crave something more innovative and distinctive.

Prada's event, which was advertised on several Chinese social media platforms, received millions of views. In a similar vein, another Italian luxury brand, Fendi, received on several social media platforms more than 2 million views with users using the hashtag "#喜茶FENDI" in early summer 2023 after its collaboration with the tea brand HEYTEA, which is popular among Chinese Gen Z consumers. However, young people like Ivan commented on social media rather skeptically, stating things like: "brand's loyalty remains, it just looks different," "break the stereotypes, make it Chinese," and "redressing white brands." Consumers' reactions on social media raise questions about Western brands' use of whiteness, and specifically voice a demand for non-white models and the adoption of *guócháo*.

I interviewed Yvette, a manager in a Chinese advertising company in Shanghai, regarding the above examples and asked about her feelings about these advertising campaigns. She told me:

> Whether or not a brand is successful, it must respect the consumers and their demands. Today, consumers in China, mainly the younger generation, can easily backlash against a brand and a product. There is no more excuse to favor a Western brand. We must be constantly alert to what consumers want and how they want something. Today, the idea that a white Western model can give value to a brand is faulty. Those brands are still white but in a symbolic way. For example, my company started to work mostly with Chinese models, incorporating Chinese elements in advertisements, and I noticed that sales rose dramatically because still consumers buy a Western brand.

Yvette's response illuminates white racial formation through advertising: whiteness is not only constructed through skin color in China but also mediated by "nationality, gender, class,

Chinese language skills" (Lan, 2022). Moreover, it emphasizes that Western products in China still index whiteness for consumers.

Some participants pointed directly at the representation of whiteness by Western brands. My interview with Eva, a 23-year-old Chinese bachelor's student in anthropology, clearly shows the dynamic of whiteness in China's advertising industry. She said:

> What matters is the message a brand wants to share with consumers. My generation experiences economic uncertainty. We can barely afford to buy a luxury product, but if we do, the brand must have a very successful communication strategy. Indeed, we are not mesmerized by white Western models that look like Barbie. I need a representation of myself, but in the right way.

Moreover, while Eva exemplifies the communicative significance of Western brands in advertising their products according to consumers' demands, her last quote suggests that several Western brands in China have failed to adjust to the local culture and thus to young Chinese consumers.

So far, there are several controversial cases in China in which Western brands have failed to adapt to the Chinese market with their online advertisements. In 2018, Dolce & Gabbana, the Italian luxury brand, released a provocative video on social media titled "Eating with Chopsticks," with a Chinese model struggling to taste Italian dishes using chopsticks. The video is considered a significant miss, with many viewers, primarily young Chinese consumers, angrily commenting online that the ad was disrespectful of their Chinese culture and identity. After this harsh criticism from Chinese consumers, many e-commerce platforms in China decided to remove Dolce & Gabbana products from their websites. The German automaker

Mercedes-Benz also drew backlash in 2021, accused of perpetuating harmful stereotypes about Asians in an advert in which they used Chinese models with very distinctive slanted eyes. Similarly, the same year, the French brand Dior received criticism, with young consumers commenting on social media that the brand was "smearing Asian women" in their social media ad that featured a Chinese model with "spooky" eyes and dark skin, dressed in traditional Chinese clothing, and holding a bag from the brand.

This is but a small sample of Western brands' advertising campaigns that failed to display cultural sensitivity toward Chinese consumers. Those ads illustrate how Western brands have used and positioned the Chinese body to embrace *guócháo*. Using the Chinese body may be understood as an attempt of those brands to shed their whiteness, make it invisible. But veiling whiteness in this way, making it symbolic and not physical, hiring Chinese models instead of white ones, does not necessarily make their products appealing to consumers.

The brands' whiteness still grounds the product's value, concealed behind the packaging. The desire to reduce brands' association with whiteness in ads under the "national wave" does not entirely reduce the commodification of whiteness, as it is sometimes still conveyed as a marker of desirability and distinctiveness. As Pitcher (2014) states: "We are all consumers, and we are all producers just as we are all positioned and produced in discourses of race." Let's now take a look at online advertising by white Western entrepreneurs, where the white body dominates the campaigns and whiteness is represented in creative practices.

The art of making whiteness desirable for consumption

Working in a small, neat, and modern design studio in central Shanghai, Ann, a 35-year-old American fashion designer and entrepreneur, not only designs clothes for adults, but she also

makes clothes and accessories for plastic dolls, like Barbie, promoting her products on China's social media platforms. Ann's designs for the dolls are embroidered in traditional Chinese patterns. At the same time, the fabrics she uses are imported from Italy and France:

> I love creating and producing designs with a Western fashion attitude but with Chinese characteristics. My designs and clothes for those dolls might look like art but conceal the dynamic of China's marketing and advertising industry to succeed as a Western brand. A product that replicates whiteness dresses as non-white. But it is still white, right? I am white.

Similarly, Sofia, a 32-year-old entrepreneur from Belgium, works as a fashion designer in Beijing, mainly creating dresses with sustainable materials, and promoting her work on various Chinese social media platforms. For her, it is crucial to stylize her online presence and her advertising campaigns as an aesthetic form for successful branding, as she explained in our interview:

> I often dance during the live streaming, wearing my dresses, and I mostly receive comments on how beautiful and flawless my dresses are made. Many users often mention on my posts that my dresses match my blond hair and aesthetically present something European. I am trying to prove to them that they are wrong and that my designs are made exclusively for young Chinese consumers and look beautiful in them. Many times, I invited my best friend, who is Chinese, to become the model for my photo shoots while I recorded the process and posted small clips later. I recognize that I am a foreigner here, but I also want to blur the lines of always feeling like an outsider. To do so, I learned Chinese fast, and now I exclusively promote my clothes in the Chinese language. Being white still benefits me somewhat, but that is not enough, especially for Gen Z.

Ann's and Sofia's narratives illustrate how representations of whiteness are creatively exposed on China's social media platforms. Their performances—through their designs, their bodies, and their use of Chinese patterns, language, and models—reveal how whiteness is both visible and invisible in the advertising sector. The invisible side becomes more 'expressive' to gain consumers' attention. As the above case studies exemplify, whiteness is ambivalent: a Western product equals a white product and thus a good product for consumption, and, at the same time, it threatens the nationalistic sentiments of consumers and the politics of *guócháo*.

Several of my research participants mentioned that *guócháo* plays an essential role in how they represent whiteness. Theano, a 32-year-old jewelry designer from Greece, shared with me

> If I want to target only Chinese consumers, it is difficult to market my products online by raising only my nationality or showing my face. Young Chinese consumers today expect from us [white Western entrepreneurs] a high performance, both from the quality of our products and the advertising campaigns on social media platforms. I literally and metaphorically need to perform myself. During my livestreams on Douyin, I speak, for example, fluent Chinese, and I have both Chinese and Western models for my posts on several social media. This also fits with consumers' demands as the advertising industry in China constantly changes. To be white or to promote a Western brand matter to some extent, but under a specific frame on how to brand a product or yourself.

When I asked why she must use China's social media platforms and target specifically young Chinese consumers, she replied

> There are the general consumers and the Gen Z consumers in China. The younger generation is the engine for China's consumption growth. Their demand from Western brands and eventually from us is to redress ourselves and our products with Chinese

characteristics. China's social media is a part of these characteristics. We constantly need to find ways to advertise and thus represent online ourselves and our work creatively.

Moreover, in China, creativity signifies a critical indicator of modernity and the country's competitiveness with the global market (de Kloet et al., 2019). The creative industry (including advertising), expressed under the Chinese policy umbrella as "industries that engage in creative cultural content, production, circulation, and services based on Internet technology and core digitization" (Xie et al., 2019: 504), is a multilayered field, charged with spreading nationalistic sentiment. In addition, social media are not only the digital spaces for expressing creative practices but are also spaces to deliver the desires of consumers. Hence, whiteness is also becomes politically visualized as represented online by Western brands and entrepreneurs.

Discussion and Conclusion

By focusing on Western brands and entrepreneurs' online advertising campaigns, this article critically examines the representation of whiteness within the context of visual communication in China. Two key points were presented. Firstly, presenting China's Gen Z nationalistic sentiments regarding consumption, this piece offered a way to conceptualize how whiteness is constructed in efforts to grab those consumers' attention. The study demonstrates that, without the stereotypical figure of the white Western model as a typical prop in advertising campaigns, an invisible form of whiteness remains involved in consumption. Using examples of famous Western fashion brands and their advertising practices, such as their integration with other Chinese brands, markets, or cultural elements, I showed that they have attempted to follow *guócháo* while whiteness remained salient through the brand's value as a Western product. The failure of several brands to adjust their branding and advertising campaigns to *guócháo* meant that China's young consumers were repulsed.

Second, and related, this article also reveals how Western entrepreneurs reinforce the representation of whiteness on social media platforms through using their white bodies and their skills in targeting the production and distribution of ads to Gen Z in China. The success of Western entrepreneurs in online ventures is primarily a result of the adaptability of whiteness, allowing consumers to subtly understand race as a commodity.

The article introduces new perspectives on how Western brands and white Western entrepreneurs in the country can approach advertising campaigns in China, where portrayals of whiteness in the media are actively debated, replicated, and enacted. In so doing, I consider the representation whiteness as a continual and incomplete narrative that influences the positions of bodies, in this case of white Western entrepreneurs, in particular ways, "affecting how they 'take up' space" (Ahmed, 2007). Whiteness thus in China's advertising sector may function as a form of commodification shaping the bodies in the digital space.

Through the above analysis of Western brands and entrepreneurs, the paper argues that the representation of whiteness in China's advertising industry is a polysemic construction. It is both visible and invisible. In addition, the invisible commodification of whiteness plays an increasingly significant role in China's consumer landscape. Thus, there is a complex interplay of the representation of whiteness on social media platforms, which aligns with its hegemonic norms of whiteness in the country.

We see that businesses adopt a marketing communication strategy to deploy aesthetics compatible with consumers' demands. These findings answer Schroeder's (2008) call for researchers to construct inquiries that allow readers to delve deeper into how images and videos communicate, and how the value they produce is reflected in the racial aesthetics in China's advertising business. The continued adaptations of Western brands suggest the need for further

research, especially in China's digital field. Finally, China's business cooperation with countries away from the Euro-American context can raise more questions about the visualization and the materiality of race.