



# Sexism and the Effectiveness of Femvertising in China: A Corporate Social Responsibility Perspective

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## Abstract

The present study draws on theories and prior research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and gender attitudes (i.e., sexism) to understand young Chinese peoples' responses toward women-empowering advertising (i.e., femvertising). We conducted two experiments in which male and female Chinese college students (232 in Study 1 and 231 in Study 2) were exposed to either women-empowering or control advertisements (traditional ad in Study 1 and gender-irrelevant ad in Study 2) and reported their attitudes about the ads as well as their purchase intentions toward the advertised products (shampoo and smartphone, respectively). In line with our predictions, both experiments showed that messaging about women's empowerment in advertising can induce perceptions of CSR, thereby increasing favorable responses such as enhanced positive ad attitudes and increased purchase intentions toward the advertised products. Moreover, hostile sexism was negatively associated with consumer responses toward femvertising such that the lower participants' hostile sexism, the more positive ad attitudes and stronger purchase intent participants they reported. However, benevolent sexism was not predictive of consumer responses toward femvertising. These results offer insights into people's responses toward women-empowering advertisements and also have practical implications for advertisers and marketers who are interested in using such an advertising tactic to promote products and services.

**Keywords** Femvertising · Sexism · Consumer behaviors · CSR

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In response to women's growing importance to the world's economy and their increased purchasing power, some marketing practitioners incorporate messages about women's empowerment in advertising to promote their products and services—a tactic referred to as “female empowerment advertising” or *femvertising* (Castillo 2014; Iqbal 2015). Specifically, femvertising has been conceptualized as “advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls” (SheKnows Media 2015, para. 1). Ever since Dove's “Real Beauty” campaign in 2004 (<https://www.dove.com/us/en/stories/campaigns.html>), companies have become enthusiastic about cashing in on female empowerment. Well-known examples include P&G/Always' “Like a Girl” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjJQBjWY-DTs>), SK-II's “Marriage Market Takeover” (for China Market, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irfd74z52Cw>), Audi's “Daughter” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iksaFG6wqM>), and Coca-Cola's “The Wonder of Us” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-REEdvDrUU>).

Previous studies on femvertising demonstrated favorable customer responses, such as improved brand attitudes and

increased purchase intentions (Akestam et al. 2017; Drake 2017; Jacobson et al. 2018; Kapoor and Munjal 2019). However, these studies focused mainly on female consumers in western countries, although many brands that utilize femvertising also target men and consumers in eastern countries (e.g., Audi, Pepsi, and Coca-Cola). Moreover, previous research examining factors that impact femvertising's effectiveness centrally focused on consumers' characteristics, such as advertisement reactance and self-consciousness (Akestam et al. 2017; Kapoor and Munjal 2019). A limited amount of research directly tested the impact of female empowerment, the defining characteristic of femvertising, on advertising effectiveness (Becker-Herby 2016; Castillo 2014; Drake 2017; Iqbal 2015). Furthermore, if femvertising challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes of women (Castillo 2014; Iqbal 2015), it is likely that people's gender attitudes (e.g., sexist prejudices) would influence their responses toward femvertisements.

Taken together, the present research sought to extend prior literature on femvertising by (a) including both male and female consumers; (b) directly investigating the way in which female empowerment, a defining part of femvertising, may influence advertising effectiveness; (c) examining whether people with different levels of gender attitudes (i.e., sexist prejudice) may differ on consumer responses; and (d) extending the scope of investigation to non-western samples (in the present case, young Chinese people). In doing so, we can contribute to a deeper and clearer understanding of why and when advertisements featuring empowering messages for women may influence people's responses. Our research can also help inform future efforts by practitioners and marketers who want to address issues of gender equality through a femvertising strategy.

## Gendered Portrayals of Women in Advertising

Research examining the effects of gendered portrayals of women in advertising dates back to 1960s when marketers started to utilize traditional gender role portrayals in advertising to make products or services more attractive to consumers (Belkaoui and Belkaoui 1976; Hawkins and Coney 1976). Findings from these studies demonstrated that women are regularly depicted in advertising in low status, decorative, disempowered roles, such as that of being housewives or preoccupied with appearance (Eisend 2010; Verhellen et al. 2016). However, whether stereotypical portrayals of women in advertising are effective in promoting products is still debated. Putrevu (2004) posited that people respond favorably to messages that are in tune with their traditional gender role beliefs. Research showed that advertisements depicting women as housewives triggered more positive consumer responses than did those utilizing nontraditional portrayals of women

(e.g., working mothers, modern women, and professionals; Duker and Tucker Jr 1977; Vantomme et al. 2005).

More recent cross-cultural research by Zawisza and colleagues replicated this pattern in the United Kingdom, Poland, and South Africa (Zawisza et al. 2018a, 2018b). However, research also suggests that college women generally felt that women were incorrectly portrayed in advertising (Zimmerman and Dahlberg 2008) and people preferred ads that were non-stereotypical over neutral and stereotypical ones (Bremer 1994). Moreover, egalitarian portrayals of women in which a working woman and her working husband share the household chores were more effective in promoting a food product than traditional portrayals of women as housewives (Jaffe and Berger 1994). Similarly, female consumers reported decreased purchase intentions toward a new product that used offensive depictions of women in its advertisement (Ford et al. 1991) and they preferred print ads that used nontraditional female depictions (i.e., superiority of women over men) over ads that used traditional male depictions (i.e., men superior to women; Orth and Holancova 2004).

## Femvertising and Female Empowerment

Femvertising is regarded as an endeavor to confront stereotypical views of women. Unlike gendered advertisements that typically contain traditional women characters alongside with commercial brands, femvertising advertisements explicitly convey empowering messages and inspire women to confidently take control of their lives (Alcoff 1988). For example, the widespread advertisement "Always like a girl" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjJQBjWY-DTs>) persuades girls and women not to put limits on what they can and should do. Similarly, Dove's "Real Beauty" Campaign (<https://www.dove.com/us/en/stories/campaigns.html>) challenges the stereotypical beauty standard for women (i.e., young, flawless, and perfect) and encourages women to celebrate their natural beauty. Such empowering messages confront female stereotypes and social stigma, and they align with Becker-Herby's (2016) descriptions of femvertising as empowering, inspirational, and inclusive as well as seeking to provide consumers with feelings of affirmation, self-confidence, and motivation.

Findings from public surveys and empirical research on femvertising effectiveness are consistent. An online survey revealed that 92% of the 628 women surveyed could recall at least one campaign that had a positive portrayal of women and more than half had purchased a specific product because they liked the way women were represented in the advertisements (SheKnows Media 2014). Similarly, empirical research showed that female participants exposed to an advertisement containing empowering messages (as compared to traditional gender role portrayals) reported more favorable attitudes

toward the advertised product and brand (Akestam et al. 2017). A more recent study showed that women's self-consciousness and need for emotion positively predicted their attitudes toward and forwarding intentions of women-empowering advertisements (Kapoor and Munjal 2019). A qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews showed that men responded positively toward a brand they perceived as truly supporting gender equality (Jacobson et al. 2018).

Despite the well-documented positive effects of femvertising on consumer responses, research on the reasons why it is effective is limited. A recent study found that women-empowering advertising can reduce consumers' advertisement reactance because, as compared to traditional gendered advertising, it utilized more complex and varied female portrayals, thereby releasing pressures for women to conform to a narrow range of role models (Akestam et al. 2017). Another study focusing on consumers' self-consciousness found that both private and public self-consciousness can positively predict favorable attitudes toward femvertisements. Although illuminating, these studies did not directly test the effect that women's empowerment may have on consumer responses. Therefore, we aimed to extend previous research by directly testing its effect. Specifically, we seek to investigate the effect of women-empowering advertisements on consumer responses.

## Corporate Social Responsibility and Women's Empowerment

*Corporate social responsibility* (CSR) is broadly conceptualized as “the managerial obligation to take action to protect and improve both the welfare of society as a whole and the interest of organizations” (Blomstrom and Davis 1975, p. 6). It reflects “a company's commitment to minimizing or eliminating any harmful effects and maximizing its long-run beneficial impact on society” (Mohr et al. 2001, p. 47). Previous research has demonstrated a positive (although sometimes weak) association between CSR and corporate financial performance (Du et al. 2007; Lichtenstein et al. 2004; Stanwick and Stanwick 1998). CSR is found to increase favorable reactions in terms of enhanced positive attitudes and increased purchase/investment intentions from key stakeholders such as employees, investors, and consumers (Brown and Dacin 1997; Diehl et al. 2016; Wang and Anderson 2011). A study with 1066 American participants showed that 87% reported they would switch from one brand to another (with equal price and quality) if the latter aligned with a good cause; conversely, 85% would consider switching to another company's products or services because the original one exhibited negative CSR practices (Cone 2007).

Thus, corporations can “achieve commercial success in ways that honor ethical values and respect people,

communities, and the natural environment” (Porter and Kramer 2006, p. 81). Because a good company's reputation is an essential part of marketing strategies and competitive advantages (Fombrun and Shanley 1990; Porter and Kramer 2006; Weigelt and Camerer 1988), it has become not only a moral obligation but also an economic imperative for corporations to take stances on political and social issues (Du et al. 2010). To appear socially responsible, companies align themselves with social issues by engaging in behaviors such as community support (e.g., donate money to non-profit organizations), employee support (e.g., implementation of egalitarian employment policy), and environmental protection (e.g., produce environmentally friendly products). Creyer (1997, p. 424) posited that “if consumers expect firms to behave ethically, then ethical behavior is a reference point against which perceived firm behavior can be judged.” In fact, according to an [online survey](#) of 628 women by the women's lifestyle media platform SheKnows Media (2014), 71% of women believe companies should take responsibility for using their advertising to promote positive messages to women and girls. Given that women's empowerment messaging explicitly conveys a corporation's support for gender equality, it is likely that femvertising can communicate CSR which may in turn induce positive consumer reactions (i.e., positive attitudes about the ad and increased purchase intentions). Therefore, we hypothesized that women-empowering advertising would be perceived as more empowering, which would further generate CSR perceptions and improve ad attitudes and increase purchase intentions.

## Sexism and Advertising Effectiveness

Undoubtedly, consumers react to CSR practices differently. Sen and Bhattacharya (2001, p. 238) stated that “CSR-related beliefs can have a direct effect on the attractiveness of the company's products.” Previous research demonstrated that consumer responses to CSR practices hinge on the level of congruence between consumers' beliefs and the value that a corporation advocates. For example, people with higher levels of self-transcendent values reported higher expectations for the ethical-philanthropic dimension of CSR (Golob et al. 2008). A study in China revealed that fashion companies' ethical and philanthropic responsibilities could be more influential when they were congruous with people's own values (Lee and Lee 2015). Similarly, a more recent study showed that when consumers' moral foundations were congruent with CSR domains, positive pro-company behaviors increased (Baskentli et al. 2019). Therefore, people with different values and beliefs likely respond differently toward CSR practices. Moreover, cumulated research demonstrated that gender role identity and attitudes play an important role in consumer responses such that people with stronger nontraditional gender

attitudes are more positive towards nontraditional portrayals of gender roles in advertisements (Baxter et al. 2015; Huhmann and Limbu 2016; Jaffe 1994; Morrison and Shaffer 2003; Zawisza et al. 2006). We, thus, predict that people's responses toward femvertising will vary with their gender-related attitudes (specifically, sexist prejudice).

Ambivalent sexism theory posits that people may exhibit ambivalence in their evaluative attitudes toward women which involve both seemingly positive and overtly negative components. Specifically, hostile sexism is an antipathy toward and derogation of women, especially those who are perceived to subvert men's power through gender or feminist ideology. In contrast, benevolent sexism has a paternalistic tone, viewing women as wonderful and indispensable for men but also weak and fragile, and thus in need of men's protections and supports (Glick and Fiske 1996, 1997, 2001). Despite the seemingly contradicting valences of the two forms of sexist attitudes, they both serve to maintain the current gender status quo, either through punishing women who challenge the traditional gender power hierarchy (e.g., businesswomen) or through rewarding those who conform to low status and traditional roles (e.g., housewives; Glick and Fiske 1996, 1997, 2001). Previous research has evidenced this "stick-and-carrot" mechanism by showing that people reported higher levels of hostile sexism when asked to think about nontraditional women (e.g., feminist or career women), but higher levels of benevolent sexism when thinking about traditional ones (e.g., housewives; Sibley and Wilson 2004). More pertinent to the present research, in the context of advertising, hostile sexism was found to predict unfavorable evaluations of women in agentic roles, whereas benevolent sexism was positively associated with favorable evaluations of women in communal roles (Harker et al. 2005; Infanger et al. 2012; Zawisza et al. 2018a, 2018b).

Taken together, findings from these studies demonstrated that hostile sexism elicits negative responses to women's empowerment whereas benevolent sexism elicits positive responses to women's compliance and obedience. Given that women-empowering advertising claims to empower women and challenge the traditional gender power hierarchy, it is plausible that people with different levels of sexism would respond differently toward femvertising ads. Therefore, we proposed that hostile sexism will be associated with unfavorable responses toward femvertising ad whereas, benevolent sexism will not be predictive of consumer responses toward femvertising ad.

## Women-Empowering Advertising in China

China also has a history of stereotyping women in advertising. Television advertising in China was found to reinforce more stereotypes than its American counterparts did by portraying

more women in non-occupational roles and more men in occupational roles (Cheng 1997). An interview with Chinese advertising practitioners revealed that representations of gender in Chinese advertising combined western stereotypes of women and traditional Chinese values of womanhood, putting women under pressure to be the "taskmaster" in the boardroom and "domestic goddess" in the kitchen (Shao et al. 2014).

The trend of stereotypical portrayals of women has turned around, to some degree, with the globalization of the women's empowerment campaign. Many brands have experimented with women-empowering advertisements and succeeded in attracting Chinese consumers. SK-II's "Change Your Destiny" attracted over 540 million views on its platform; meanwhile, Olay's campaign hashtag, "New Year Next Stop," earned over 110 million views and 176,000 comments (Gartner 2019). The so-called post-80s and post-90s women or millennial women are most responsive to women-empowering messaging because it is congruent with their desires to "carve out a bigger role in society than being only someone's wife or mother" (Forsman and Bodenfors 2018, para. 1). Given the rising movement of women's empowerment in Chinese advertising as well as its documented influences on Chinese consumers, we investigated femvertising effectiveness and its mechanisms among Chinese consumers. By doing so, we can also present a valuable and novel contribution to our understanding of gendered advertising globally.

## The Present Studies

We investigated the effect of femvertising on consumer responses as well as the role of sexism in predicting consumer responses toward femvertising strategies in two studies of young Chinese participants. Specifically, we tested four hypotheses: (a) Femvertising will increase favorable consumer responses in terms of positive ad attitudes and higher purchase intent (Hypothesis 1); (b) In a serial mediation model, the perceived empowerment of women in femvertising will induce perceptions of corporate social responsibility, thereby increasing favorable consumer responses (Hypothesis 2); (c) Higher hostile sexism will be associated with less favorable responses toward femvertising (Hypothesis 3), and (d) benevolent sexism will be unrelated to consumer responses toward femvertising (Prediction 4).

## Study 1

Study 1 aimed to investigate consumer responses toward femvertising, its possible mechanisms, and the potential role of sexism in predicting consumer responses toward different type of ads. Specifically, we predicted that female

empowerment may induce CSR perception, thereby improving ad attitudes and increasing purchase intentions toward the advertised products. We further predicted that lower levels of HS be associated with favorable responses toward women-empowering advertisements, and BS would not be predictive of consumer responses toward femvertising. Moreover, previous research demonstrated that positive moods can facilitate brand attitudes (e.g., Batra & Stayman 1990); therefore, we measure moods to rule out alternative explanations.

### Selection of Stimuli

We searched for pairs of commercials that appeared comparable in terms of product category and brand familiarity, but different in their levels of women's empowerment. As a result, we chose two shampoo ads of the same brand (i.e., Pantene) designed exclusively for a Chinese market as the materials we used in our study. The two videos both contained several female characters. In the traditional ad, all young women were portrayed as preoccupied with outward appearances and constantly worried about how they looked in others' eyes. The traditional ad claims that the shampoo can solve people's hair problems, so that they can have flowing long black hair. In contrast, the femvertising ad depicted women of a wide range of ages who, instead of conforming to the stereotypically cultural beauty standard (i.e., having black long straight hair, <https://video.tudou.com/v/XMzI4MzU5MzUy.html>), explicitly claimed that they can determine the colors or styles of their hair ([https://www.iqiyi.com/w\\_19ru-c66g8t.html](https://www.iqiyi.com/w_19ru-c66g8t.html)). Although the advertised shampoos are not designed exclusively for women, only female characters appeared in both ads. We assessed brand and product familiarity as well as previous exposures to the ads and used them as covariates in all analyses. We also measured participants' positive and negative moods to rule out the possibility that different ads might induce different moods, thereby influencing consumer responses.

### Pilot Test

To make sure the two ads were comparable but differed in the extent to which they were empowering, we pilot tested them with an independent sample of 104 students (54 women) from the same university as study participants. Specifically, on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*), participants were randomly assigned to evaluate one of the two ads by answering three questions: "To what extent is this ad empowering," "To what extent are the women in the ad powerful," and "To what extent is the product functional?" Participants were also instructed to indicate their prior experiences with the product by answering two questions: "To what extent are you familiar with the product" and "To what extent are you familiar with the brand?"

Results showed that the femvertising ad ( $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = .63$ ) was rated as more empowering than the traditional ad ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = .69$ ),  $F(1,100) = 20.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .17$ ; women characters in the femvertising ad ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) were rated as more powerful than those in the traditional ad ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ),  $F(1,100) = 11.49$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ ; and the ad type had no effect on perceived function of the product,  $F(1,100) = .512$ ,  $p = .48$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .005$ . Moreover, participants in different conditions did not differ on their familiarity with the product,  $F(1,100) = .23$ ,  $p = .631$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ , and the brand,  $F(1,100) = 2.03$ ,  $p = .157$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$  (In addition, we tested the interaction of ad type and gender on all the measures. The results of these tests were not significant, and a full description of the results can be found in the [online supplement](#).)

### Participants and Design

Fully 232 participants (117 women;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.68$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ , range = 18–25) from an university in southern China participated in this experiment for partial course credits. A sensitivity analysis using G\*power 3.1 indicated that a sample of 232 provided 80% power ( $\alpha = .05$ ; two-tailed) to detect an individual predictor effect as small as Cohen's  $f^2 = .06$  (equivalent to an  $r^2_p$  of .06) in a multiple regression analysis with five predictors (Faul et al. 2009). Participants were randomly assigned to the femvertising or the traditional ad condition.

### Procedure and Materials

The experiment was administered individually such that participants were escorted by a female experimenter to a private cubicle to complete the experiment on a computer. They were instructed to work on several different tasks alleged to measure personality traits and consumer attitudes. First, sexism was measured with the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick and Fiske 1996). The ASI consists of two 11-item subscales that assess hostile sexism (e.g., "Women seek power by gaining control over men.") and benevolent sexism (e.g., "Women should be cherished and protected by men."). This scale was translated into Chinese by the first author and then was back-translated into English by a bilingual psychology professor. Modifications were made until the authors agreed that the back translation matched the original meaning of the English version. On a 7-point scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*), participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each statement. Their ratings were reversed (when necessary) and averaged to index sexism, with higher scores indicating more hostile and benevolent sexist attitudes ( $\alpha s = .71$  for both subscales).

Next, participants were instructed to complete an ads evaluation task whereby the experimental manipulation was delivered. Specifically, participants in the femvertising condition

watched the femvertising ad, whereas participants in the traditional condition watched the traditional ad. Afterwards, participants' positive and negative moods were measured. On a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), they answered two questions on positive mood ("I feel good" and "I feel positive";  $r = .39, p < .001$ ) and two on negative mood ("I feel bad" and "I feel negative";  $r = .51, p < .001$ ). The ratings were averaged separately to index their positive and negative moods.

Participants then were instructed to evaluate the ad and the product. Specifically, participants evaluated the ad on two items: "I feel good/positive toward the ad" on a 9-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*) ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ). Average scores were calculated to index positive attitudes toward the ad. Participants then indicated their purchase intentions toward the product on three items: "I will choose this product over other similar products"; "I am interested in this product"; and "I would like to purchase the product," rating each on the same 9-point scale. The scores were averaged to index purchase intentions ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Participants also answered two questions: "I am familiar with the product/brand," also using the same 9-point scale. Averaged scores were used to index prior experience with the product ( $r = .53, p < .001$ ).

Finally, participants indicated, on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), how much they agreed with each of three items: "The women in the ad are powerful/independent/have more control." The ratings were averaged to measure perceived women's empowerment ( $\alpha = .72$ ). Participants also indicated perceived CSR with two items rated on the same 7-point scale: "To what extent is the brand socially responsible?" and "To what extent does the brand have integrity?" The ratings were averaged to measure CSR, with higher scores indicating more perceived CSR ( $r = .86, p < .001$ ). A debriefing followed.

## Results

### Mood

Participants' positive,  $F(1, 229) = .40, p = .529, \eta_p^2 = .002$ , and negative,  $F(1, 229) = .17, p = .682, \eta_p^2 = .001$ , moods did not differ between the femvertising condition and the traditional ad condition. Therefore, differences between the two groups on consumer responses cannot be attributed to participants' moods.

### Hypotheses 1

We tested whether femvertising can induce favorable consumer responses. An ANCOVA analysis with familiarity being controlled revealed a significant main effect of ad type on ad attitudes,  $F(1, 226) = 11.02, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .070$ , such that participants responded more positively toward the

femvertising ad ( $M = 5.24, SD = 1.72$ ) than the traditional ad ( $M = 4.40, SD = 1.95$ ). The main effect of gender,  $F(1, 226) = 1.29, p = .257, \eta_p^2 = .006$ , and the interaction between ad type and gender,  $F(1, 226) = .23, p = .636, \eta_p^2 = .001$ , were both not significant. However, for purchase intentions, the results showed nonsignificant main effect of ad type,  $F(1, 226) = 1.16, p = .282, \eta_p^2 = .005$ , and gender,  $F(1, 226) = .60, p = .439, \eta_p^2 = .003$ , as well as the interaction between the two,  $F(1, 226) = .11, p = .736, \eta_p^2 = .001$ . Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was for supported for ad attitudes but not for purchase intentions.

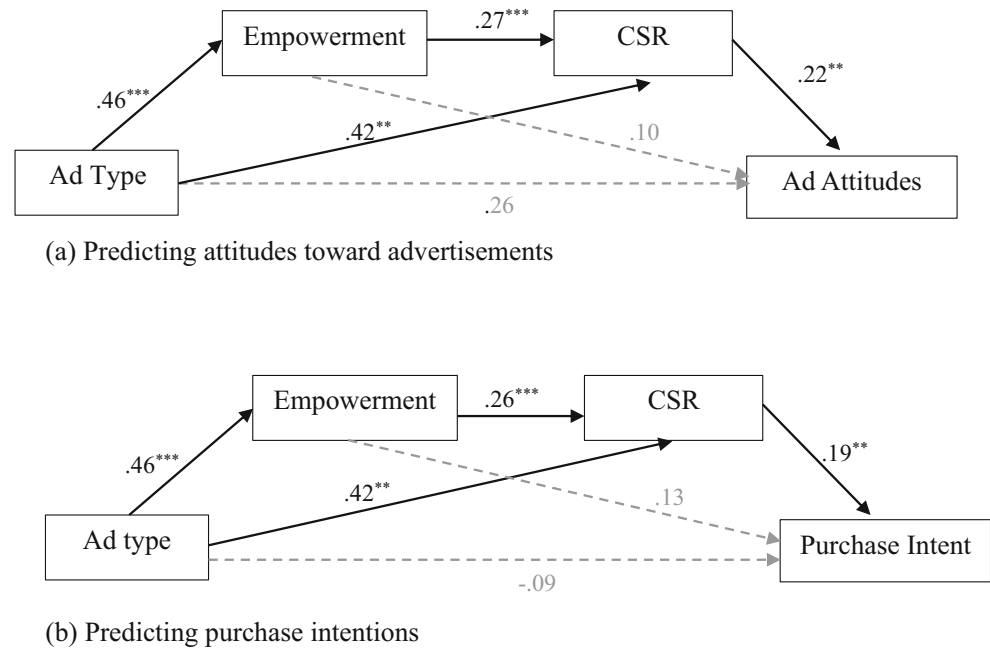
### Hypotheses 2

We tested whether the empowering messaging in femvertising can induce perceptions of CSR, thereby leading to favorable consumer responses. An ANOVA analysis revealed a significant main effect of ad type on women's empowerment such that participants in the femvertising condition ( $M = 4.69, SD = .93$ ) perceived more empowerment than those in the traditional condition ( $M = 3.73, SD = .93$ ),  $F(1, 226) = 54.42, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .194$ . The main effect of gender,  $F(1, 226) = 1.88, p = .172, \eta_p^2 = .008$ , and the interaction between ad type and gender,  $F(1, 226) = .66, p = .419, \eta_p^2 = .003$ , were both nonsignificant. Additionally, the main effect of ad type on perceived CSR was also significant, such that participants in the femvertising condition ( $M = 4.47, SD = 1.16$ ) perceived more CSR than those in the traditional condition ( $M = 3.76, SD = 1.03$ ),  $F(1, 226) = 28.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .112$ . The main effect of gender,  $F(1, 226) = .38, p = .537, \eta_p^2 = .002$ , and the interaction between condition and gender,  $F(1, 226) = .44, p = .508, \eta_p^2 = .002$ , were both nonsignificant.

**Mediation Predicting Ad Attitudes** We performed mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro (Model 6; Hayes 2013) with 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals and 5000 bootstrap resamples to examine whether perceived women's empowerment and CSR could mediate the effect of ad type on ad attitudes. Ad type (femvertising = 1; traditional = 0) was entered as the independent variable (X), women's empowerment (M1) and CSR (M2) as serial mediators, and ad attitudes as the dependent variable (Y). The results revealed a significant indirect effect from ad type to ad attitudes via CSR: (indirect  $b = .18, SE = .09, 95\% CI [.031, .381]$ ) and a significant indirect effect from ad type to ad attitudes via women's empowerment and then CSR (indirect  $b = .12, SE = .05, 95\% CI [.042, .231]$ ) (see Fig. 1a).

**Mediation Predicting Purchase Intentions** Despite the lack of direct effects from ad type to ad attitudes and purchase intentions, we followed recommendations by several scholars (Hayes 2017; Rucker et al. 2011; Zhao et al. 2010) who argued that a significant indirect effect is the sole criterion for

**Fig. 1** Serial mediation model of the relationship between ad type and (a) attitudes toward ads and (b) purchase intentions through empowerment and corporate social responsibility (CSR), study 1. \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$



establishing mediation, even in the absence of direct effects. We then tested the same serial mediation model on purchase intentions. The results demonstrated a significant indirect effect via CSR (indirect  $b = .11$ ,  $SE = .06$ , 95% CI [.014, .257]) and a significant indirect effect from ad type to ad attitudes via perceived women's empowerment and then CSR (indirect  $b = .07$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI [.017, .150]) (see Fig. 1b). Therefore, our Hypothesis 2 was fully supported.

### Hypotheses 3

Consistent with previous studies (Glick et al. 2000; Zawisza et al. 2018a, 2018b, HS and BS were positively correlated in the present sample ( $r = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ). To test whether hostile sexism interacted with ad type to predict ad attitudes and purchase intentions, we regressed hostile sexism (mean-centered), ad type (femvertising = 1, traditional = 0), gender (female = 0, male = 1), all the two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction of the three variables onto participants' (a) ad attitudes and (b) purchase intentions. Familiarity and benevolent sexism were treated as covariates. Detailed regression coefficients and  $p$ -values are presented in Table 1a.

#### Ad Attitudes

The results revealed a significant interaction between ad type and hostile sexism ( $\beta = -.45$ ,  $t = -3.24$ ,  $p = .001$ ; see Fig. 2a). All the other effects were not significant. Simple slope analyses showed that among participants in the femvertising condition, lower levels of hostile sexism were associated with more favorable ad attitudes ( $b = -.42$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $t = -2.04$ ,  $p = .044$ , 95% CI [-.83, -.12]). This association was not significant

among participants in the traditional condition ( $b = .26$ ,  $SE = .25$ ,  $t = 1.04$ ,  $p = .303$ , 95% CI [-.24, -.77]). Furthermore, among participants lower in hostile sexism ( $-1$   $SD$  below the mean), those in the femvertising condition reported more positive ad attitudes than did participants in the traditional condition ( $b = 1.51$ ,  $SE = .33$ ,  $t = 4.55$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.86, 2.17]). However, among participants higher in hostile sexism ( $+1$   $SD$  above the mean), their ad attitudes did not differ between the two ad types ( $b = .36$ ,  $SE = .34$ ,  $t = 1.04$ ,  $p = .300$ , 95% CI [-.32, 1.03]).

#### Purchase Intentions

The results showed that hostile sexism was significantly associated with purchase intentions ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $t = 2.38$ ,  $p = .018$ ). The two-way interaction between ad type and hostile sexism was also significant ( $\beta = -.48$ ,  $t = -3.43$ ,  $p = .001$ ) (see Fig. 2b). Simple slopes analyses demonstrated that among participants in the traditional condition, hostile sexism was positively associated with purchase intentions ( $b = .33$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $t = 2.15$ ,  $p = .034$ , 95% CI [.03, .63]). This association was not significant among participants in the femvertising condition ( $b = -.24$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $t = -1.44$ ,  $p = .150$ , 95% CI [-.58, .09]). These results were consistent with our Hypothesis 3. Furthermore, among participants lower in hostile sexism ( $-1$   $SD$  below the mean), those in the femvertising condition reported stronger purchase intentions than did participants in the traditional condition  $b = .63$ ,  $SE = .23$ ,  $t = 2.73$ ,  $p = .007$ , 95% CI [.18, 1.09]). However, among participants higher in hostile sexism ( $+1$   $SD$  above the mean), their purchase intentions did not differ between the two ad types ( $b = -.24$ ,  $SE = .24$ ,  $t = -1.01$ ,  $p = .310$ , 95% CI [-.71, .23]).

**Table 1** Regression analyses predicting ad attitudes and purchase intentions from hostile sexism and ad type, studies 1 and 2

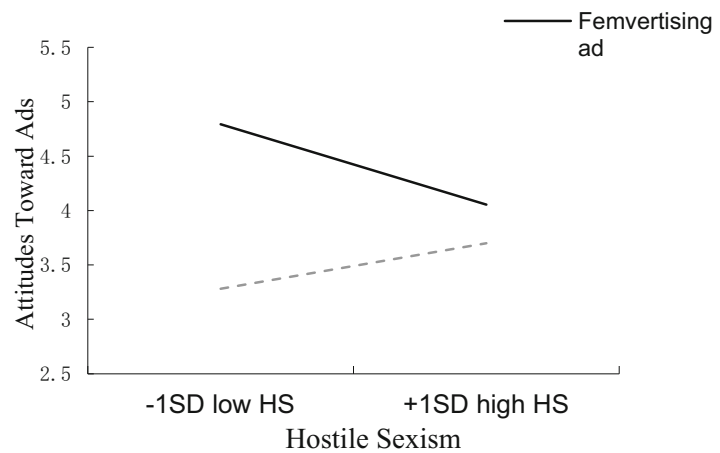
		Purchase Intentions																							
		Ad Attitudes			Step 1			Step 2			Step 3			Step 4											
Variables		$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>									
<b>(a) Study 1</b>																									
Familiarity		.18	2.83	.005	.22	3.34	.001	.17	2.58	.011	.18	2.77	.006	.26	4.02	<.001	.24	3.56	<.001	.26	3.81	<.001			
BS		-.06	-.93	.36	-.04	-.64	.520	-.03	-.42	.679	-.03	-.37	.712	.001	.02	.986	-.01	-.18	.856	-.06	-.59	.553			
Ad Type					.26	4.00	<.001	.17	1.69	.093	.13	1.23	.220	.07	1.05	.297	-.01	-.07	.943	.27	2.38	.018			
HS					-.03	-.47	.640	.97	.91	.365	.17	1.462	.145	-.01	-.11	.911	.18	1.70	.090	.05	.44	.663			
Gender					-.05	-.68	.500	-.12	-.12	.229	-.08	-.82	.412	.06	.79	.432	-.002	-.02	.982	-.48	-.343	.001			
Ad Type x HS					-.31	-.279	.006	-.45	-.324	.001							-.30	-.268	.008	.10	.76	.450			
Ad Type x Gender					.14	1.01	.314	.12	.89	.373							.12	.90	.37	-.21	-.144	.150			
HS x Gender					.13	1.35	.177	-.05	-.37	.712							.02	.24	.81	.33	2.12	.035			
Ad Type x HS x Gender					.26	1.66	.098																		
<i>F</i>		4.31*			5.18****			4.32****			4.18****			8.10****			3.31**			3.49****					
<i>df</i> , <i>df</i> <sub>error</sub>		2, 227			5, 224			8, 221			9, 220			2, 227			8, 221			9, 220					
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.04			.10			.14			.15			.07			.11			.13					
$\Delta R^2$		.04			.07			.03			.01			.07			.03			.02					
<b>(b) Study 2</b>																									
Familiarity		.02	.37	.714	.001	.01	.990	.001	.01	.990	<.001	-.01	.995	.14	2.21	.028	.15	2.48	.014	.14	2.32	.021	.14	2.28	.023
relevance		.21	3.19	.002	.38	5.90	<.001	.37	5.77	<.001	.37	5.77	<.001	.36	5.80	<.001	.43	6.62	<.001	.42	6.49	<.001	.42	6.53	<.001
BS		-.06	-.97	.332	-.10	-.165	.101	-.11	-.179	.074	-.11	-.179	.075	.04	.64	.523	.05	.87	.387	.03	.55	.581	.03	.55	.583
Ad Type					.46	7.14	<.001	.37	3.90	<.001	.38	3.95	<.001	.20	3.10	.002	.14	1.49	.137	.16	1.69	.093	.16	1.69	.093
HS					-.04	-.57	.569	-.15	-.133	.183	-.11	-.82	.411	-.13	-.205	.042	-.12	-.107	.287	-.04	-.29	.776	-.04	-.29	.776
Gender					-.02	-.28	.783	.08	.87	.384	.08	.87	.384				.03	.28	.782	.03	.55	.582	.03	.55	.582
Ad Type x HS					.02	.21	.832	-.04	-.30	.765							-.21	-.224	.026	-.33	-.244	.016	-.33	-.244	
Ad Type x Gender					.16	1.45	.148	.16	1.45	.150							.11	.99	.319	.11	.99	.322	.11	.99	.322
HS x Gender					.15	1.67	.097	.09	.67	.502							.21	2.38	.018	.09	.71	.476	.09	.71	.476
Ad Type x HS x Gender					.09	.62	.537																		
<i>F</i>		3.69*			10.89****			7.87****			7.10****			14.17****			10.14****			8.45****			7.78****		
<i>df</i> , <i>df</i> <sub>error</sub>		3, 222			6, 219			9, 216			10, 215			3, 222			6, 219			9, 216			9, 216		
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.05			.23			.25			.25			.16			.22			.26			.27		
$\Delta R^2$		.05			.18			.02			.001			.16			.05			.04			.01		

BS Benevolent sexism, HS Hostile sexism; Ad Type = Femadvertising (coded 1) or traditional (coded 0); Gender (female = 0, male = 1)

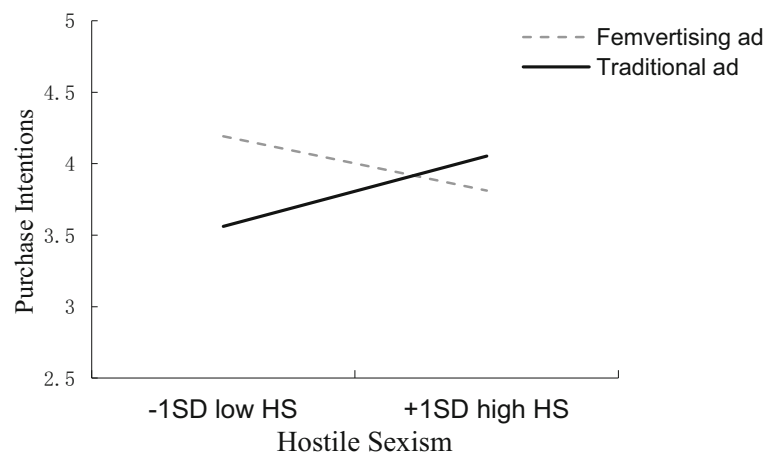
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$



**Fig. 2** Hostile sexism (HS) interacted with ad type to predict participants' (a) ad attitudes and (b) purchase intentions, study 1. Solid, black lines indicate significant slopes whereas gray, dashed lines represent nonsignificant slopes



(a) Predicting attitudes toward advertisements

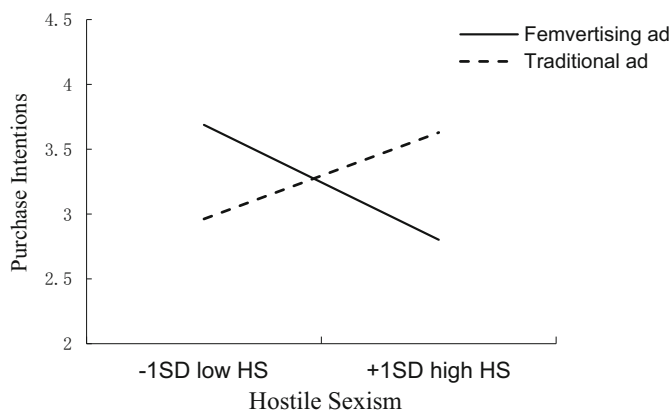


(b) Predicting purchase intentions

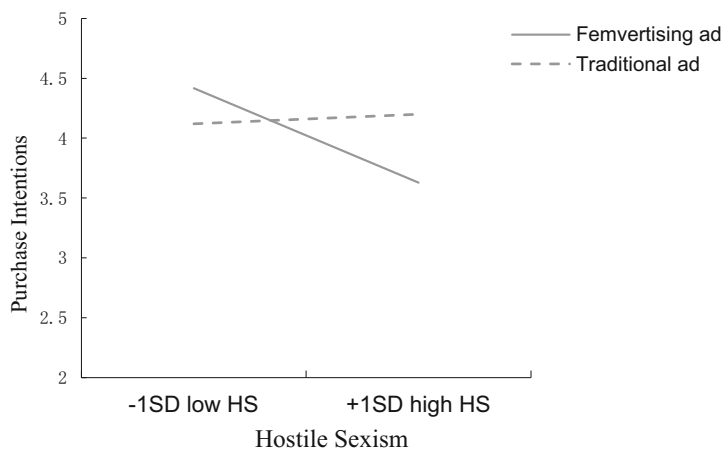
Moreover, the three-way interaction among ad type, gender, and hostile sexism was also significant ( $\beta = .33$ ,  $t = 2.12$ ,  $p = .035$ ). We then regressed ad type (femvertising = 1, traditional = 0), hostile sexism (mean-centered), and the two-way interactions separately for men and women onto purchase intentions and treated familiarity and benevolent sexism as covariates. Results showed that for female participants, higher endorsement of hostile sexism was associated with stronger purchase intentions ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $t = 2.40$ ,  $p = .018$ ), and the two-way interaction between ad type and hostile sexism ( $\beta = -.41$ ,  $t = -3.38$ ,  $p = .001$ ) was significant (see Fig. 3a). Simple slope analyses showed that among women in the femvertising condition, hostile sexism was negatively associated with purchase

intentions ( $b = -.58$ ,  $SE = .29$ ,  $t = -2.05$ ,  $p = .047$ , 95% CI  $[-1.16, -.003]$ ). This association was reversed among women in the traditional condition ( $b = .44$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $t = 2.53$ ,  $p = .014$ , 95% CI  $[.09, .78]$ ). Furthermore, among women lower in hostile sexism ( $-1$  SD below the mean), participants in the femvertising condition were more likely to intend to purchase the product than were those in the traditional condition ( $b = .73$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $t = 2.84$ ,  $p = .005$ , 95% CI  $[.22, 1.23]$ ). However, among women higher in hostile sexism ( $+1$  SD above the mean), those in the femvertising condition were equally likely to intend to purchase the product as were women in the traditional condition ( $b = -.83$ ,  $SE = .42$ ,  $t = -1.97$ ,  $p = .051$ , 95% CI  $[-1.66, .003]$ ). All the effects were not

**Fig. 3** A three-way interaction among participants' gender, ad type, and hostile sexism broken into the two-way interactions between ad type and hostile sexism separately for (a) women and (b) men, study 1. Black lines indicate significant simple slopes whereas grey lines designate nonsignificance



(a) Predicting purchase intentions for women



(b) Predicting purchase intentions for men

significant for male participants (see Fig. 3b; detailed results can be found in the [online supplement](#)).

#### Prediction 4

To test whether benevolent sexism interacted with ad type to predict ad attitudes and purchase intentions, we regressed benevolent sexism (mean-centered), ad type (femvertising = 1, traditional = 0), gender (female = 0, male = 1), all the two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction of the three variables onto participants' ad attitudes and purchase intentions. Familiarity and hostile sexism were treated as covariates. The results showed that the interaction between BS and ad type was not significant for ad attitudes ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $t = -.92$ ,  $p = .358$ ) and purchase intent ( $\beta = -.11$ ,  $t = -.81$ ,  $p = .419$ ).

#### Summary

Taken together, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported such that femvertising strategy increased ad attitudes but had no effect on purchase intent. However, consistent with Hypothesis 2, mediational analyses did demonstrate that the empowering messaging in femvertising ad increased perceived CSR, thereby enhancing favorable consumer responses in terms of both ad attitudes and purchase intent. Moreover, in the femvertising condition, lower levels of HS was associated with more positive attitudes for both women and men, but stronger purchase intent only for women. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. The possible explanation for the gender difference on purchase intent might be that shampoo was regarded as a feminine product and thus appeared unattractive to men.

Supporting Prediction 4, BS was not predictive of consumer responses toward femvertising. However, it should be noted

that BS was also not associated with participants' reactions toward the traditional ad, which is not in keeping with the notion that benevolent sexism functions as a reinforcement of current gender status quo through rewarding women's conformity to traditional gender roles (Infanger et al. 2012; Sibley and Wilson 2004; Zawisza et al. 2018a, 2018b). Although unexpected, this result may suggest that in China, a relatively gender-conservative country, people show blatant sexist attitudes toward nontraditional women (i.e., overt punishment through lack of acceptance for nontraditional roles but not greater support for traditional gender roles).

## Study 2

Previous research on gendered advertising routinely compares people's different reactions toward traditional and nontraditional gender portrayals; however, many brands utilize advertisements that have no reference to gender roles. Therefore, Study 2 aimed to examine the effectiveness of femvertising in comparison with ordinary advertising that does not contain gender-related messages. Moreover, in Study 2, we utilized a relatively gender-neutral product (i.e., smartphone; Zawisza and Pittard 2015) to further explore the effect of femvertising on male consumers' purchase intentions. We predicted that a women-empowering ad can increase men's, as well as women's, purchase intentions toward a neutral product.

### Selection of Stimuli

We chose two smartphone ads of the same brand (i.e., MEIZU) designed exclusively for the Chinese market. The empowering ad depicts women with various jobs (i.e., pilot, race car driver, scientist, and photographer) who explicitly declare that they can determine whatever careers they would like to pursue (<https://v.qq.com/x/page/i0381x1f815.html>). All the women characters are depicted as users of the advertised smartphone. The control ad does not contain any human characters but only exhibits the functions of the phone ([https://www.iqiyi.com/w\\_19ru6k8bfx.html](https://www.iqiyi.com/w_19ru6k8bfx.html)). Like Study 1, the products of the same brand should be able to rule out potential confounding effects of familiarity and product attributes. We assessed participants' brand/product familiarity and perceived function of the product and again used them as co-variables in all our analyses. Compared to the control ad, the empowering ad presented a group of women as the users of the advertised smartphone but did not contain any information about the function of the phone, which might be regarded as less irrelevant to the product. Therefore, we asked participants to evaluate the relevance of the ad contents to rule out alternative explanations. Moreover, the ad in the control condition did not contain any human characters; thus, it would be odd to ask participants to rate how empowering was an ad without

any human characters in it. Therefore, we removed the measure of empowerment from both the ads to make sure the materials were all the same between the two conditions except the manipulation.

### Participants and Design

Fully 231 participants (122 women;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.94$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ , range = 18–23) from an university in south China participated in our experiment for partial course credits. A sensitivity analysis using G\*power 3.1 indicated that a sample of 231 provided 90% power ( $\alpha = .05$ ; two tailed) to detect an individual predictor effect as small as Cohen's  $f^2 = .04$  (equivalent to an  $r^2_p$  of .04) in a multiple regression analysis with six predictors (Faul et al. 2009). Participants were randomly assigned to the femvertising condition or the control condition.

### Procedure and Materials

As with Study 1, our second experiment was administered individually. Participants were instructed to work on several different tasks alleged to measure personality traits and general attitudes. First, sexism was measured with the ASI used in Study 1 (Glick and Fiske 1996). These ratings were averaged separately for benevolent sexism ( $\alpha = .75$ ) and hostile sexism ( $\alpha = .76$ ) to index sexist attitudes, with higher scores indicating stronger hostile and benevolent sexist attitudes.

Participants were then randomly assigned to watch a femvertising ad or a control ad. Participants in the femvertising condition watched an ad featuring women with different non-traditional jobs (e.g. pilot) whereas those in the control condition watched an ad including detailed descriptions of the functions of the product. Afterwards, their positive and negative moods were measured with the same items used in Study 1 ( $r = .39$  for positive moods;  $r = .51$  for negative moods;  $ps < .001$ ). Using the same 9-point scale from Study 1, participants reported their ad attitudes and purchase intent. The scores were averaged to index ad attitudes ( $r = .74$ ) and purchase intentions ( $\alpha = .88$ ) toward the product. Participants also answered the same questions as in Study 1 about their prior experiences with the product. Averaged scores were used to index their familiarity with the product ( $r = .74$ ). Moreover, because the femvertising ad did not contain any information about the function of the smartphone, we asked participants to evaluate the relevance of the content (i.e., "To what extent are the contents of the ad relevant to the product") and function of the product (i.e., "To what extent the product is functional") on 9-point scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*) to rule out alternative explanations. Finally, participants indicated perceived CSR on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with the same items used in Study 1. The ratings were averaged ( $r = .83$ ). A debriefing followed.

## Results

**Moods** Participants' positive,  $F(1,228) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .136$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , and negative,  $F(1,228) = .16$ ,  $p = .692$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ , moods did not differ between the femvertising condition and the traditional condition. Therefore, the effect of women-empowering messages on consumer responses cannot be attributed to induced moods.

**Attributes of the Ads** Participants did not differ on their familiarity with the product between the femvertising condition ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ) and the control condition ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 2.07$ ),  $F(1,228) = .99$ ,  $p = .322$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .004$ . The perceived function of the product did not differ between the femvertising condition ( $M = 4.66$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) and the control condition ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ),  $F(1,228) = .05$ ,  $p = .826$ ,  $\eta_p^2 < .001$ . However, participants rated the contents of the femvertising ad ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) as less relevant than the control ad ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 2.07$ ),  $F(1,228) = 35.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .137$ .

**Hypotheses 1** We tested whether femvertising can induce favorable consumer responses. An ANCOVA analysis with familiarity and relevance being controlled revealed a significant main effect of ad type on ad attitudes,  $F(1, 223) = 43.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .163$ , such that participants responded more positively toward the femvertising ad ( $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ) than the traditional ad ( $M = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ). The main effect of gender,  $F(1, 223) = .23$ ,  $p = .629$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ , and the interaction between the two,  $F(1, 223) = 2.73$ ,  $p = .199$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .012$ , were both not significant. Similarly, for purchase intentions, the results showed a significant main effect of ad type,  $F(1, 223) = 1.10$ ,  $p = .008$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .031$ , such that participants reported stronger purchase intent in the femvertising condition ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) than in the control condition ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ). The main effect of gender,  $F(1, 223) = 1.10$ ,  $p = .295$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .005$ , as well as the interaction between ad type and gender,  $F(1, 223) = 3.18$ ,  $p = .076$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .014$ , were not significant. Therefore, our Hypothesis 1 was supported.

**Hypothesis 2** We tested whether femvertising can induce perception of CSR, thereby increasing favorable consumer responses. An ANCOVA analysis with familiarity and relevance being controlled revealed a significant main effect of ad type such that participants in the femvertising condition ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) reported more CSR than those in the control condition ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ),  $F(1, 223) = 27.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .110$ . The main effect of gender,  $F(1, 223) = 1.63$ ,  $p = .203$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .007$ , and the interaction between ad type and gender  $F(1, 228) = 1.15$ ,  $p = .286$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .005$ , were both nonsignificant.

We performed a mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes 2013) with 95% bias-corrected and

accelerated confidence intervals and 5000 bootstrap resamples to examine whether CSR mediates the effect of ad type on ad attitudes. Ad type (Femvertising = 1; control = 0) was entered as the independent variable (X), CSR as the mediator (M), and ad attitudes as the dependent variable (Y). A significant indirect effect via CSR was observed (indirect  $b = .57$ ,  $SE = .13$ , 95% CI [.33, .84]) (see Fig. 4a). In addition, a direct effect was also observed from ad type to ad attitudes ( $b = .97$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $t = 4.42$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.54, 1.41]). We tested the same mediation model on purchase intentions. A significant indirect effect via CSR was found (indirect  $b = .35$ ,  $SE = .10$ , 95% CI [.17, .56]; see Fig. 4b). These results were consistent with Hypothesis 2.

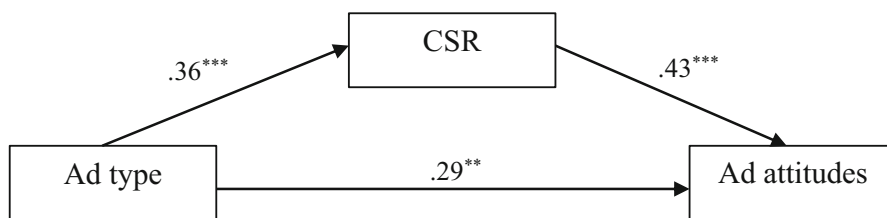
**Hypotheses 3** HS and BS were positively correlated in the present sample ( $r = .21$ ,  $p = .002$ ). To test whether hostile sexism interacted with ad type to predict consumer responses toward femvertising, we regressed hostile sexism (mean-centered), ad type (femvertising = 1, control = 0), gender (female = 0, male = 1), all the two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction of the three variables onto participants' (a) ad attitudes and (b) purchase intentions. Familiarity, relevance, and benevolent sexism were treated as covariates. Detailed regression coefficients and  $p$ -values are presented in Table 1b.

**Ad Attitudes.** The main effect of ad type was significant ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $t = 5.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ) such that participants were more positive toward the femvertising ad than the control ad. All the other effects were nonsignificant.

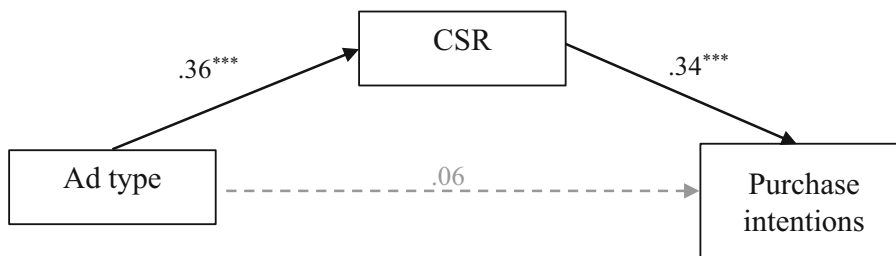
**Purchase Intentions.** The two-way interaction between ad type and hostile sexism was significant ( $\beta = -.33$ ,  $t = -2.44$ ,  $p = .016$ ; see Fig. 5). All the other effects were nonsignificant. Simple slope analyses showed that among participants in the femvertising condition, lower levels of hostile sexism were associated with more purchase intent ( $b = -.44$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $t = -3.11$ ,  $p = .002$ , 95% CI [-.72, -.16]). This association was not significant among participants in the control condition ( $b = .05$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $t = .27$ ,  $p = .789$ , 95% CI [-.29, .38]). Furthermore, among participants lower in hostile sexism ( $-1$   $SD$  below the mean), those in the femvertising condition more strongly intended to purchase the product than participants in the control condition ( $b = .97$ ,  $SE = .24$ ,  $t = 3.98$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.50, 1.44]). However, among participants higher in hostile sexism ( $+1$   $SD$  above the mean), participants' purchase intent did not differ between the two conditions ( $b = .15$ ,  $SE = .25$ ,  $t = .61$ ,  $p = .544$ , 95% CI [-.34, -.65]).

**Prediction 4** To test whether benevolent sexism interacted with ad type to predict consumer responses toward femvertising, we regressed benevolent sexism (mean-centered), ad type (femvertising = 1, control = 0), gender (female = 0, male = 1), all the two-way interactions and the three-way interaction of the three variables onto participants'

**Fig. 4** Mediation model of the relationship between ad type and (a) attitudes toward the advertisement and (b) purchase intentions through corporate social responsibility (CSR), study 2. \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$



(a) Predicting ad attitudes



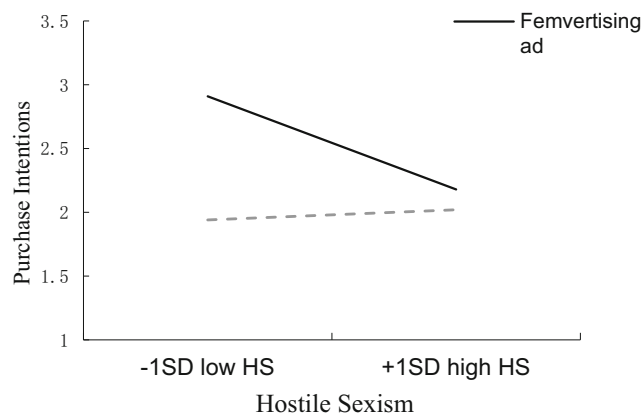
(b) Predicting purchase intentions

ad attitudes and purchase intentions. The results revealed that the main effect of ad type was significant ( $\beta = .353, t = 3.733, p < .001$ ); participants responded more favorably toward the femvertising ad than the control condition. Moreover, the interaction between BS and ad type was not significant for ad attitudes ( $\beta = -.01, t = -.07, p = .946$ ) and purchase intent ( $\beta = -.12, t = -.92, p = .358$ ).

negatively associated with purchase intent for femvertising but unrelated to consumer responses toward traditional ad. It should be noted that the gender differences on purchase intent found in Study 1 did not emerge, which might suggest femvertising works more efficiently on men for gender-neutral product. Prediction 4 was supported such that BS was not predictive of consumer responses toward femvertising.

**Summary**

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported such that ad type increased ad attitudes and purchase intent through increased perception of CSR. Our results demonstrated that HS was



**Fig. 5** Hostile sexism (HS) interacted with ad type to predict purchase intentions, study 2. The black slope is significant; the grey is not

**General Discussion**

The current study provides insights into Chinese people’s reactions to women-empowering advertising from a perspective of corporate social responsibility, and it helps to refine an understanding of women’s empowerment in advertising and its effect on consumer responses. In two studies, we found that femvertising increased favorable ad attitudes and purchase intent for consumers. Moreover, in support of Hypotheses 1 and 2, the empowerment of women induced perceptions of CSR, thereby increasing favorable consumer responses. Specifically, Study 1 illustrated that exposure to an empowering advertisement led female (but not male) participants to report higher purchase intentions toward the advertised product and this effect was mediated by perceived female empowerment and CSR. Furthermore, Study 2 demonstrated that for a unisex product (i.e., smartphone), the effect of women’s empowerment on purchase intent can be generalized to male consumers.

Consistent with previous research, gender attitudes, namely sexism, are associated with different response toward femvertising. In specific, both Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that people with different levels of sexism responded differently toward women-empowering messages, such that femvertising was more effective in boosting ad attitudes for people with lower levels of hostile sexism. In contrast, for people with higher levels of hostile sexism, their responses did not vary with ad type. These results are congruent with previous findings showing that lower levels of hostile sexism were associated with positive reactions toward women who challenge traditional gender power hierarchy (Infanger et al. 2012; Masser and Abrams 2004; Zawisza et al. 2018a, 2018b). Moreover, benevolent sexism was not predictive of consumer reactions toward femvertising in the present study. In fact, these results are in keeping with the notion that benevolent sexism functions as a reinforcement of the current gender status quo by rewarding women's conformity to traditional gender roles (Infanger et al. 2012; Sibley and Wilson 2004; Zawisza et al. 2018a, 2018b). Our findings thus point to the importance of considering the type of sexism in determining the predictive value of sexism of femvertising effectiveness.

Our findings also extend prior research by showing that the effect of women empowerment can be generalized to men, especially those with lower levels of hostile sexism. Furnham and Mak (1999) found that female characters tend to appear in ads that sell household products, food, and body products whereas male characters are more likely to appear in ads that sell automobiles or sports products. However, our research demonstrated that male consumers low in hostile sexism also exhibited boosted attitudes toward ads containing women empowering messages. However, it is worth noting that male consumers may not show increased purchase intentions toward all types of products that utilize a women-empowering strategy. The present research demonstrated that men's purchase intentions only increased for unisex products (i.e., smartphone) but not for products possibly deemed as feminine (i.e., shampoo). These results suggest that men low in hostile sexism may not only hold a generally supportive attitude toward femvertising, but also have a selective consumption orientation toward products. In fact, recent research showed that ads contained traditional gender role portrayals were less effective than those with nontraditional gender role portrayals for unisex but high-involving products such as smartphones (Zawisza and Pittard 2015). Future research could focus on testing the generalization of such an effect on other types of products.

Our research highlights the importance of explicit female empowering messages in boosting consumer attitudes. In fact, although research on advertising utilizing (non)traditional portrayals of women returns inconsistent results; our research is consistent with previous findings showing that women empowerment in advertising is effective. This effect might be

attributable to the peculiar characteristic of femvertising—explicit women empowering messages. Specifically, previous research on gendered advertising typically testing the effectiveness of ads presenting women characters alongside with products either in traditional (e.g., housewives or caregivers) or nontraditional roles (e.g., business women or professional women). Such advertisements seldom convey any explicit messages about gender role beliefs or values. For example, in recent research, Zawisza et al. (2018a, 2018b) exposed participants to a nontraditional ad for orange juice featuring a blonde woman character in her early 30s, wearing a grey suit and carrying a brown brief case. Although this ad can be regarded as a nontraditional portrayal of women (i.e., businesswoman), it did not explicitly advocate for women to pursue nontraditional careers. The results from their study revealed that people reported less favorable attitudes toward nontraditional gender portrayals cross-culturally (Poland, South Africa, and the United Kingdom). Conversely, in our research, femvertising triggered positive consumer responses through explicit women empowerment and CSR. Therefore, our findings may imply that brands utilizing gendered advertising might need to exhibit a clearer match with the social cause so as to increase consumers' evaluations of their ads and products.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Our study has limitations that we think can project ideas for future research. First, our samples were uniform in terms of their cultural backgrounds. Specifically, our research was conducted exclusively on Chinese consumers, although existing cross-cultural research supports universality rather than the cultural specificity of gender stereotypes in advertising (Cheng 1997; Frith et al. 2004; Matthes et al. 2016; Paek et al. 2011; Zawisza 2019; Zawisza et al. 2018a, 2018b). However, it remains critical for future studies to examine if observed patterns can be replicated cross-nationally.

Second, for reasons of feasibility, our studies have relied on small, convenient student samples. It is crucial for subsequent studies to test similar hypotheses using larger non-student samples, preferably older consumers. Research demonstrated that aspirational ads are particularly influential among Millennials (born 1980–1994) and GenZ consumers (born 1995–2015; Nielsen 2015), and they have become increasingly popular. In 2015, all the top viral emotive ads included related messaging terms described as “empowering,” “positive,” and “inspirational,” indicating that contemporary marketing is trending towards these themes (Zazzi 2015). Moreover, previous research demonstrated age differences in levels of sexist attitudes such that Millennials continued trends toward more egalitarian gender roles; however, White women Boomers (born 1946–1964) exhibited the highest levels of egalitarianism (Donnelly et al. 2016). Given that people's

attitudes toward femvertising vary with their levels of sexism, people of different ages might respond differently toward women-empowering advertisements. Therefore, future studies should investigate whether the patterns found in the present study can be replicated in older consumers.

Third, the empowering and traditional ads used in the present research may be not completely comparable such that they may differ on other dimensions beyond for the extent to which women are empowered. Although we have tried to choose comparable ads and we measured and controlled several potential confounding aspects of the ads such as familiarity, perceived function, and content relevance, additional studies are needed to further isolate the proposed effects of women's empowerment. For example, in Study 1, we did not explore potential differences in the perceived physical attractiveness of female characters between the femvertising condition and the control condition. Although purchase intentions might not necessarily vary with model attractiveness (Bower and Landreth 2001; Caballero et al. 1989); previous research did demonstrate favorable consumer responses toward ads featuring attractive characters (DeBono and Telesca 1990). In our study, although both ad types primarily included thin and conventionally attractive models, women in the empowering ads had a broader age range and more diverse body types than those in the traditional ads. It is plausible that empowered women are perceived as more attractive than traditional women characters, thereby inducing more favorable consumer responses. Although Study 1 demonstrated that two serial mechanisms through which ad types influences consumer responses are female empowerment and perceived CSR and Study 2, comparing an ad featuring empowered women with an ad without women characters, replicated the effect of femvertising on consumer responses, future research is still needed to identify and control confounding variables such as model attractiveness to rule out alternative explanations.

Fourth, our research mainly focused on the effect of female empowerment on consumer behaviors; however, questions regarding whether and how it might influence women's mental and physical health remain unanswered. It is worthy of further investigation to examine whether women-empowering messages will actually do good for women. In fact, recent research demonstrated higher state objectification in women exposing to ostensibly empowering beauty advertisements and showed no evidence of favorable changes in self-efficacy and felt empowerment in these women (Bue and Harrison 2019). One limitation with this prior research is that the empowering ads promoted products exclusively related to physical appearance (e.g., clothing, skincare) which might subtly make salient concepts related to physical attractiveness. Furthermore, this previous research did not investigate whether sexist attitudes might be a potential moderator of such an effect. It remains unknown whether empowering ads of products unrelated to physical appearance (e.g., car, drinks)

might actually empower women. Therefore, future research can investigate whether women empowerment might influence women differently based on their levels of sexism or how different types of products promoted by empowering ads might induce different responses.

## Practice Implications

Consumers tend to reward companies with financial incentives for their socially responsible activities and develop favorable evaluations of the companies and products (Brown and Dacin 1997; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). In addition, consumers are willing to pay a higher price for products produced by the companies with higher levels of CSR (Creyer 1997). Our research demonstrated that femvertising can trigger favorable consumer responses because women empowering messages elicit CSR perceptions of the brands. These results suggest that modern consumers become more receptive to marketing tactics that use accurate imagery of women and represent their real desires. Therefore, marketers could consider incorporating female empowerment messaging in advertising so as to strengthen relationships with consumers and increase consumers' ad attitudes. However, advertisers and marketers should consider the effectiveness of femvertising in different segments of consumers, such that target audiences' gender attitudes may be monitored and measured before using a female empowerment advertisement strategy.

Prior research revealed that the effects of CSR are influenced by the level of congruence between a brand and the cause that it supports (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). Barone et al. (2000) demonstrated that consumers prefer a brand that shows an altruistic motivation to support a social cause to a comparable brand that forms alliance with a social cause for the purpose of generating sales. For example, for a company with a reputation of sexually objectifying women, its supports for women's empowerment may encourage public criticisms and elicit undesirable consumer reactions. Therefore, companies utilizing women-empowering tactics should align themselves with a cause and exhibit a conceptual match between the two.

Moreover, intervention programs should be cautious about exposing women to femvertising ads to empower women. Our study indicated that advertisements containing empowerment themes are effective in inducing favorable consumer responses; however, according to previous research, they may still have the unintended effect of priming state objectification in comparison to neutral advertisements (Bue and Harrison 2019). Additionally, although people perceived women characters in femvertising ads as empowered, they might not necessarily feel empowered themselves. Therefore, future advertisement development should include testing to make sure that

materials used are effectively empowering, while being sensitive to the presence of any objectifying content or imagery.

## Conclusions

Our research investigated femvertising effectiveness through the scope of CSR and demonstrated that perceived women empowerment and CSR mediated the effect of femvertising on Chinese consumers' responses. Furthermore, lower levels of hostile sexism were associated with more positive responses toward women-empowering advertisements whereas benevolent sexism was not predictive of consumer responses toward femvertising. Our findings thus have practical implications for marketers considering using a women-empowerment strategy as a brand management tactic.

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