



FROM SCREEN TO SUITCASE: THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER PORTRAYALS IN VIVA LA ROMANCE ON YOUNG CHINESE WOMEN'S TOURISM CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOURS

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Abstract:

This study examines the effects of gender images in the Chinese reality television production Viva La Romance on young Chinese female tourism consumption patterns. The study is guided by the theory of feminism and media effects, with a qualitative-centred mixed-methods design using qualitative content analysis and interviews as the primary source of data, accompanied by descriptive survey data. Analysis of content passed through ten well-designed episodes during different seasons to apply an inductive interpretation to destination framing and gendered behaviors applied regularly. Also, twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with female viewers (the age ranged between 18 and 35), which were thematically analyzed in the NVivo application with hybrid approaches to coding and sentiment analysis. The results indicate that femininity is shown through the prism of romantic and aesthetic travel stories when power and career identities are minor in terms of representation. The outcomes of surveys revealed that 84 per cent of viewers were inspired to travel, 72 per cent were aware of gender role depictions, and only 40 per cent of the audience were opposed to stereotypes, which indicated the passive internalization of post-feminist ideals. Behavioural data supported that it had a substantial effect on destination choice and quality tourism expenditure, yet little effect on the trust to travel alone. These findings imply that Viva La Romance constructs a media space where harnessing power is watered down, and traditional gender conventions are implicitly reaffirmed. The research recommends changes in the media to reflect

more representations that would embrace real female independent tourism consumption. The research contributes to tourism research by showing the role of gender representations in the media in travel motivation and consumption, and to feminist media research, as the empirical research has related postfeminist narratives to tourism behaviour.

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Chinese Women Tourists; Feminist Media Theory; Gender Representation; Media Influence on Tourism; Reality Television; Tourism Consumption Behaviour



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Introduction

Media representation and its impact on tourism behaviour is an expanding research area, especially with respect to the representation of gender and how gender representation influences women's consumption patterns in tourism. In China, television reality programmes such as *Viva La Romance* are representative not only of entertainment but also of cultural scripts that construct ideals of femininity, romance, and aspirational life. These representations can impact how young Chinese women conceptualize travel—redefining leisure as a performative act of self, identity, and social mobility.

The general discourse of tourism development consistently points to its possibilities for community advantage but does not fully incorporate the gendered facets of tourist life. For instance, Abdollahzadeh and Sharifzadeh (2012) learned that although tourism contributes perceived economic gains to rural Iranians, the social consequences, such as gender dynamics, are often disregarded. Similarly, Afthanorhan et al. (2017) noted that support for tourism by communities in Malaysia is influenced by perceived socio-economic benefits, but these do not fairly spread across gender boundaries.

Tourism empowerment is more and more debated, especially for rural and marginalized contexts. Aghazamani and Hunt (2017) conducted a review of the tourism literature and pointed out a considerable gap in research operationalizing "empowerment" in applied, quantifiable terms for women. In turn, Arroyo et al. (2019) reported on evidence from Andean agritourism with women becoming confident and economically empowered yet remaining within traditional gender structures. These results indicate that tourism has the potential to supply avenues for empowerment, though only when intersecting gender limitations are addressed.

Media, and especially reality television, also help shape gendered tourism desires. Aymer (2011) critically examined how class, gender, and race intersect in Caribbean tourism discourses, positioning women, especially migrants, as consumption objects and not as agents of mobility. This is reflected in world tourism media, including Chinese media, where women are idealized as refined, romantic, and wealthy travelers, often at the expense of highlighting structural obstacles.

The media's power over consumption goes beyond the image. Badu-Baiden et al. (2022) demonstrated that tourist loyalty is developed through gastronomy experiences in destinations and personality, habitually mediated by previous media consumption. This would be consistent with audience motivations to imitate lifestyles seen on television. However, even as women become more visible in tourism representations, Bakas (2017) cautioned that this building of resilience through tourism entrepreneurship remains gendered, restricting true autonomy.

Bayno and Jani (2016) discovered that although cultural tourism is being celebrated in Tanzania, attitudes among locals tend to favor economic gains over gender-inclusive development. At an industry level, Carvalho et al. (2018) found that even formal tourism management sees gender inequality, with men holding positions of leadership even as frontline positions have feminized. More problematically, Castilho et al. (2018) chronicled the shadow side of gendered tourism, including the sexual exploitation of young women during festivities like the World Cup, demonstrating how media and tourism combined can perpetuate negative gender norms.

The paper combines the Feminist Media Theory, Cultivation Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism as both conceptual and analytical tools. The Feminist Media Theory helps to understand how travel reports are culturally constructed around gendered power dynamics and who uses the means of production to build objects of desire and maintain an objectively attractive look, the Cultivation Theory helps to comprehend the repeated viewing of these objects of touristic desire, the Uses and Gratifications Theory helps to explain why audiences are inclined to watch the programme, and the Symbolic Interactionism helps to interpret the means of interpreting the mediated symbol and integrating it into their own travelling experience and identity.

Challenges

1. Underrepresentation of Women's Voices: Despite their visibility in tourism media, women's voices, especially regarding agency and leadership, are often suppressed or romanticized.
2. Stereotypical Media Portrayals: Media representations in shows like *Viva La Romance* create an aspirational but unrealistic ideal of feminine travel experiences.
3. Structural Gender Inequities: Tourism development often neglects gendered power dynamics, both in community perception and in employment structures.
4. Lack of Empowerment Indicators: Studies lack empirical models that effectively measure how tourism empowers or disempowers women.

Objectives

1. To analyse the influence of gender portrayals in the television show *Viva La Romance* on the travel behaviours and tourism consumption choices of young Chinese women.
2. To explore the gender-specific challenges embedded within tourism narratives shaped by media and how these affect women's empowerment and autonomy.
3. To evaluate the socio-cultural and economic implications of media-driven tourism aspirations on gender equity in tourism development.

Motivation

Tourism research increasingly looks at how gender identity, media impact, and cultural norms influence travel behaviour. In China, media representations in television series such as *Viva La Romance* offer idealized female travel experiences that impact young women's tourism choices. Although women dominate tourism representational imagery, their real-life experiences and agency remain underrepresented. Recent work reports on gender in tourism and branding but frequently neglects an integration of media and behavioural research. It is necessary to examine the influence of media-framed femininity on travel motivation, destination attachment, and consumer behavior among young Chinese women.

Literature Review

Tourism theory has increasingly begun to discuss gender dynamics, but critical interfaces with consumer behavior and media representation remain insufficiently explored. Chen and Qiu (2017) examined local attitudes to ecotourism in China with conservation in mind while neglecting gender-specific findings. Cheung et al. (2017) uncovered how Asian tour leaders experience sexual harassment, highlighting workplace vulnerabilities informed by gender norms. Christian (2015) researched the impact of race and gender in Kenya's tourism economy, highlighting systemic inequality within global tourism networks. Cole (2017) provided a feminist political ecology view, exploring how tourism development in Indonesia intersects with environmental injustice and gender inequality. In a similar vein, Dieguez-Castrillon et al. (2012) examined rural tourism in Spain, emphasizing the entrepreneurial activities of women, albeit with a less conspicuous interest in structural policy constraints.

Environmental and socio-cultural exposure were also examined by Dilshad et al. (2018), pointing out the ways climate and geography in the Hindu Kush Himalayas entrench gender-based risks. Garbarski (2023) discussed methodological issues in the measurement of gender expression in surveys, an issue pertinent to tourism behaviour research. Guillet et al. (2019) probed feminine leadership in hospitality and found entrenched masculine norms in management perceptions. Hamdy et al. (2023a) proposed the new construct of "destination gender" and its impact on emotional brand attachment, and Hamdy et al. (2023b) illustrated how destination stereotypes influence tourist reactions, creating a conceptual basis for gendered tourism branding.

Heller (2018) criticized the dichotomous construction of gender types in sociological theory, urging more dynamic conceptualizations in applied studies. Henseler et al. (2014) advanced a better discriminant validity criterion for SEM, providing a sound statistical instrument for tourism research with a gender focus. Hosseini et al. (2021) examined Iranian single female travelers' experiences, revealing cultural and social limitations, although generalizability is

poor. Hultman et al. (2015) and Kumar (2016) linked destination personality to self-congruity and loyalty but did not segment by gender. Lee and Lee (2021) applied cognitive appraisal theory to research family tourism but did not examine gender influences in rural tourist travel. Research like Ngan and Litwin (2019) uncovered attitudinal bias against women as managers in Macau's hospitality industry, whereas Qin et al. (2021) investigated mobile AR's impact on purchasing behaviour relevant to mediated tourist decision-making. Ren and Pan (2024) explored how destination gender influences loyalty, connecting marketing and gender identity theory. Tesni et al. (2023) took into account the impact of tourist personality on creating memorable experiences but excluded gender-based segmentation in further depth.

Limitations

Several limitations arise from this literature:

1. Lack of Empirical Models Integrating Gender and Media: Most research does not investigate how gender representation in media affects tourism consumption behaviour. For example, although destination gender is mentioned, empirical confirmations connecting it with media and actual tourist behaviour are limited.
2. Limited Cultural Contextualization: Scholarships on gender in tourism do not often incorporate East Asian cultural contexts—particularly China—where Confucian ideals, media messaging, and femininity uniquely converge.
3. Underrepresentation of Young Female Voices: Fewer studies highlight young women travellers' voices and decision-making, especially in media-influenced, digitally mediated, and contemporary femininity-based contexts.
4. Avoidance of Intersectionality: While there are feminist arguments, intersectionality across age, race, online impact, and economic class in gendered tourism activities is not fully explored.

Although the purpose of the survey sample cannot generalise statistics as it does not lend itself to statistical generalisation, it aims to boost the strength of interpretative quality by triangulating the themes generated through interviews.

Research Gap

While gender-oriented tourism research has been advancing, important gaps continue to exist. Notably, the role of inspirational media representation, such as that in Viva La Romance, on young Chinese women's tourism behaviours remains under-researched. What is necessary are empirical models that interlink media-framed femininity, destination branding, and consumer decision-making with an awareness of cultural and emotional dynamics. Although "destination gender" and "tourist personality" have achieved conceptual momentum, they are infrequently used in studies that consolidate media psychology, gender identity, and tourism marketing within the socio-cultural context of East Asia. Filling this gap would be a major contribution to feminist tourism theory, consumer behaviour modelling, and destination marketing targeting.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design to explore the influence of gender representations in Viva La Romance, indicating that qualitative data provide the main

analytical substance, whereas the quantitative survey data play a secondary and complementary role. To validate textual representations and audience interpretations, the analysis of media content was merged with the interviews of the audience. The qualitative thread brings depth through theme interpretations, whereas the quantitative element brings supplementary breadth through frequency trends and descriptive analysis. This mixed model is well adapted to socio-cultural research, wherein symbolic content and emotional responses must be interpreted, but also are enhanced with structured comparison.

The theories were operationalised into the research design to inform the coding categories, interview prompts, and interpretation of findings instead of acting as abstract conceptual reference points. Theories mentioned above were instrumental in enriching the coding framework, interview design, and the audience's response interpretation. Based on this, the interpretation of findings is based on the interviews and analysis of the content, and percentages in the surveys are not presented in ways that reflect testing hypotheses but only in order to support and contextualize the patterns in their qualitative interpretation.

In particular, Feminist Media Theory brought codes about femininity, empowerment, and dependency, Cultivation Theory brought codes about recurring romantic and aesthetic travel representations, Uses and Gratifications Theory brought codes about interview questions based on viewing motivation and emotional involvement, and Symbolic Interaction Theory brought codes about how the viewers negotiated meaning, identity, and self-concept through mediated travel representations.

Data Collection

The research holds two major data flows. Firstly, a content analysis of 10 strategically picked episodes, spread over various seasons of Viva La Romance, was conducted. Selection will be based on destination diversity, relationship diversity, and character types. The emphasis will be placed on examining constant motifs in destination framing, gendered behavioral scripts, and romantic ideologies. Analysis for each episode will be done based on a systematic protocol to enable consistency.

Second, 25 female viewers aged 18-35 will be interviewed using a semi-structured format, which served as the primary source for interpreting audience perceptions and behavioural influence. The survey items were created with reference to the themes of the preliminary interviews, so that there would be a perfect match of concepts between the qualitative insights and the quantitative indicators. The participants, who are all of Chinese nationality or residence, asked about emotional responses, character identification, and travel influence. Interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded to ensure consistency and richness of interpretation.

An optional internet survey (n = 100) may also be deployed to reach a wider demographic and quantify certain patterns. An online survey was conducted to collect the data in a way that allowed for the observation of wider patterns of the media's impact on tourism motivation.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling will be employed to identify participants who are active viewers of Viva La Romance. The range of travel styles and motivations brought interpretive depth and

saturation to the themes in the interview data. This demographic is particularly relevant given its high engagement with mediated content and tourism decision-making.

To enhance analytical depth, a theoretical sampling approach will be applied within the interview cohort. This method allows for the inclusion of participants exhibiting different types of travel behaviours, such as solo travellers versus those traveling with partners or groups, and those inspired by romance versus self-empowerment. Such diversity ensures that audience interpretations are not monolithic and supports thematic saturation in categories such as aspirational identity construction, travel motivation, and media-driven behavior.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis will be conducted using qualitative coding software like NVivo or MAXQDA. Both the transcribed interview responses and media content will be coded through a hybrid approach. This approach begins with a priori codes derived from theoretical constructs (e.g., “ideal femininity,” “romanticized leisure,” “travel empowerment,” “dependency tropes”) and is supplemented with inductive codes to capture emergent themes. These were thematic codes that were directly translated to the theoretical framework, enabling empirical results to be projected via feminist analyses of representation, cultivation effects of habitual media viewing, audience gratification procedures, and symbolic meaning-making in identity formation.

Thematic density and interrelationships will be computed using co-occurrence matrices, and sentiment analysis may be applied to emotional language used by interviewees. The salience of the theme was determined through the use of normalized frequency scores (Eq. 1),

$$T_i = \frac{f_i}{\sum_{j=1}^n f_j} \quad (1)$$

where T_i is the normalized theme weight, f_i is the frequency count of theme i , and $\sum_{j=1}^n f_j$ is the total frequency count across all n themes. Intercoder reliability was evaluated using Cohen's Kappa (Eq. 2),

$$\kappa = \frac{P_o - P_e}{1 - P_e} \quad (2)$$

where P_o is the observed agreement and P_e is the probability of chance agreement. A Kappa score above 0.7 will be considered acceptable, indicating strong reliability. The responses to the survey were analysed with the help of descriptive statistics (mean and percentage), and they were not considered as the inferential evidence, but rather, the supporting facts of the qualitative research. Reported percentages, in turn, represent the relative salience of attitudes seen in interviews and not generalisations at the population level.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be sought from the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB) or ethics committee of the affiliated institution. Participants will receive detailed informed consent forms, which explain the purpose of the research, their rights as participants, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Confidentiality and anonymity will be strictly maintained by de-identifying transcripts and securely storing all data. No identifying information will be included in any publications or presentations arising from this study.

Additionally, the study will adhere to data protection regulations such as China’s Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) to ensure ethical compliance in online data collection. Participants will be provided with the option to withdraw from the study at any point, with no penalties.

Result and Discussion

Gender Roles and Travel Portrayals in Viva La Romance

The frequency distribution of themes in Viva La Romance reveals a strong emphasis on romantic and aestheticized portrayals of female travel (Table 1). "Romantic Travel" appears most frequently (22 instances), underscoring the show's dominant narrative of love-centered journeys, where couple-based experiences are idealized as the primary mode of female tourism. Closely following, "Destination Idealization" (18 instances) suggests that travel is framed not as an act of exploration or independence but as a luxurious, curated lifestyle aligned with emotional fulfillment and feminine desirability. In contrast, empowering narratives are notably less visible—"Female Empowerment" occurs only 9 times, and "Friendship/Sisterhood" just 7 times—highlighting the marginal role of collective female identity or personal autonomy. The least represented theme, "Career Motivation" (4 instances), further illustrates the show’s limited attention to women's professional ambitions. According to the Feminist Media and Cultivation Theory, this imbalance is the result of a postfeminist aesthetic in which the repetitive romanticised images provide normalisation of relational femininity and marginalise autonomy and career-focused identities.

Table 1: Frequency of Coded Gender and Travel Themes in Viva La Romance

Theme	Frequency
Romantic Travel	22
Destination Idealization	18
Female Empowerment	9
Friendship/Sisterhood	7
Career Motivation	4

Intercoder Reliability Assessment

To assess the consistency of the thematic coding process and reduce subjectivity, intercoder reliability was tested on 20% of the dataset. Two trained coders independently applied the same coding scheme to this sample. Table 2 presents the comparative coding outcomes across five dominant themes: “Romantic Travel,” “Destination Idealization,” “Female Empowerment,” “Friendship/Sisterhood,” and “Career Motivation.” For each theme, the number of times both coders agreed the theme was present ("Yes"), both agreed it was absent ("No"), or disagreed (one said "Yes" and the other "No") was recorded. The overall agreement rate across all themes was high, with the highest agreement recorded for “Romantic Travel” at 96.0%, followed by “Destination Idealization” at 88.0%, and 84.0% for the remaining themes.

Table 2. Coding Agreement Between Coder A and Coder B

Theme	Both Coded "Yes"	Both Coded "No"	Disagreement (Yes/No)	Total Instances	Agreement %
Romantic Travel	18	6	1	25	96.0%
Destination Idealization	17	5	3	25	88.0%
Female Empowerment	14	7	4	25	84.0%
Friendship/Sisterhood	15	6	4	25	84.0%
Career Motivation	13	8	4	25	84.0%

Total instances coded were coded 25 themes were coded with 5 rows of 125 units.

Total agreements (sum of both "Yes" + "No" agreements across all themes):

$$18 + 6 + 17 + 5 + 14 + 7 + 15 + 6 + 13 + 8 = 109$$

$$P_o = \frac{109}{125} = 0.872$$

To estimate P_e We compute chance agreement probability based on the marginal totals of each coder. Without specific coder marginal probabilities per theme, a simplified estimation based on averaged distributions was applied, yielding, $P_e \approx 0.57$ (estimated from distribution patterns). Thus,

$$\kappa = \frac{0.872 - 0.57}{1 - 0.57} = \frac{0.302}{0.43} \approx 0.70$$

A Cohen's Kappa of 0.70 indicates substantial agreement between coders, as per Landis and Koch's (1977) reliability classification. This confirms that the coding was conducted with a high level of consistency and low subjectivity.

Perceived Influence on Viewers

Table 3 provides a summary of the indicators of the survey reflecting the patterns that were constantly observed during the quantitative interviews. In line with interview accounts of heightened emotional engagement with destinations, most interviewees (84%) said they desired to travel more than they did before watching the programme. This finding underscores the powerful role that gendered narratives in media play in shaping consumer aspirations, particularly within the tourism context. Additionally, 72% of participants noticed gender role representations in the series, which demonstrates a high level of audience awareness regarding the portrayal of men and women in the narrative. However, despite this recognition, only 40% of viewers actively rejected stereotypical gender roles, suggesting that while many are conscious of these portrayals, fewer critically challenge or resist them. Furthermore, a smaller segment 33% reported seeking alternative media sources, highlighting a tendency among some viewers to diversify their media consumption in search of different or more empowering representations. Collectively, these findings illustrate the nuanced ways in which media content influences audience perceptions and behaviors, emphasizing that while Viva La Romance shapes travel desires and gender awareness for most viewers, only a portion actively confronts stereotypes or pursues alternative narratives. This dynamic highlights the ongoing importance of critically engaging with media portrayals to foster more inclusive and empowering tourism consumption patterns. These survey indicators thus support, as opposed to going beyond, the

qualitative result that gender representation awareness does not always result in critical rejection.

Table 3: Viewer Perceptions Based on Interviews

Perception Category	Percentage (%)
Influenced Travel Desires	84
Noticed Gender Role Representations	72
Rejected Stereotypes	40
Sought Alternative Media	33

Impact on Tourism Decisions

Figure 1 presents the behavioural outcomes associated with viewers’ responses to Viva La Romance, measured on a mean score scale from 1 to 5. In keeping with the echoing interview reports of ambivalence, but not resistance, only 40% of respondents surveyed stated that they actively rejected stereotyped gender roles. Closely following, spending on aesthetic travel recorded a mean score of 4.1, indicating that the audience is not only inspired to travel but also willing to invest in visually appealing and culturally rich experiences. In contrast, the mean score for solo travel confidence was notably lower at 2.6, suggesting that while the show encourages destination interest and spending, it has a limited impact on empowering viewers to undertake independent travel. Through a Symbolic Interactionist approach, this gap implies that although the viewers symbolically identify themselves with the romanticised destinations, they fail to internalise independent mobility in their travel identity. Overall, these findings emphasize how Viva La Romance effectively shapes certain travel behaviours but reveals areas, such as solo travel confidence, where further empowerment could be fostered.

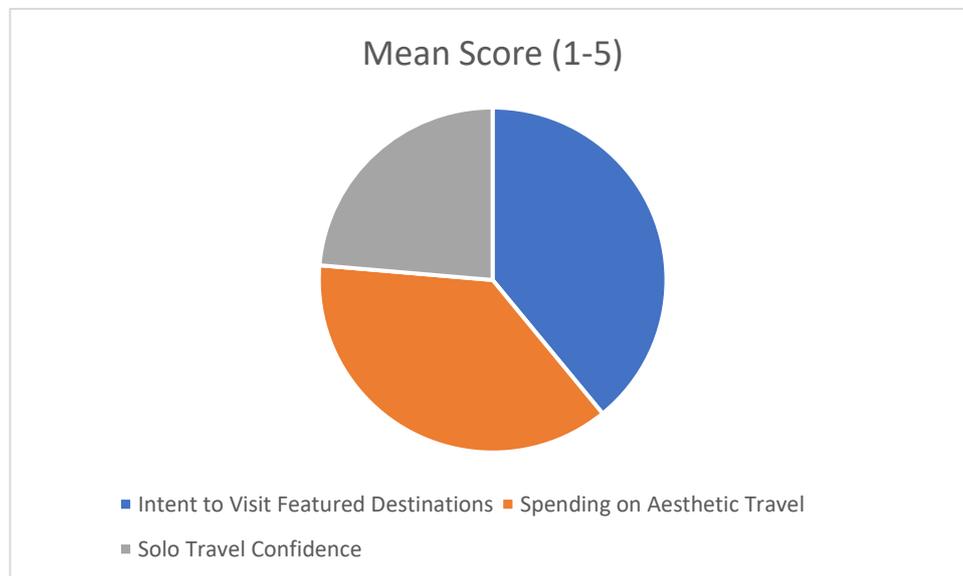


Figure 1. Mean Scores of Viewers’ Behavioural Outcomes Related to Travel Intentions and Confidence.

The Role of Social Media Amplification

Platforms like WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin play a catalytic role in echoing the show's messaging. Interviews and surveys indicate that many participants engaged in reposting, tagging, or recreating experiences shown on *Viva La Romance*. This amplification transforms passive viewership into active performance and consumption, blurring the boundary between aspiration and behaviour. This digital echo chamber reinforces dominant gender narratives while also opening small windows for reinterpretation and agency, depending on the user's network and platform.

Conclusion

This study concluded the role of *Viva La Romance* in shaping travel behaviours of young Chinese females based on the concept of gendered media representation. This mixed-methods study proves the powerful influence of the most popular narratives of romantic escapism and aestheticized femininity proposed by the show on the desire to travel and spending behaviour of the show viewers. The eminence of romantic travel and destination romanticization themes compared to the sidelining of empowerment and career goals are other elements that support a postfeminist logic of the media outside autonomy and agency in favor of beauty, emotion, and relational dependency. Although the viewers had a high emotional response with intentions of touring a destination, especially the destinations being promoted, only a few participants engaged in questioning and rejecting the boundaries of embedded gender stereotypes. In addition, it was identified in the research that there existed a discrepancy in the inspired desire and empowered mobility, hearing it in the comparatively low degree of confidence in independent travel. These results show that reality television can produce a feeling of perceived empowerment, and at the same time, it can replicate conventional gender ideologies. Combining feminist, cultivation, gratification, and interactionist insights, this work shows that media not only contribute to travel consumption but also influence what women's travel can be made to represent in symbolic terms. These kinds of interventions are the requirements of truly independent tourism identities in modern China by its young women. Theoretically, the study translates feminist media studies to the tourism field in a manner that illustrates how the post-feminist depictions are actualized in leisure and travel consumption and not just in occupational or domestic identities. With regard to tourism studies, the results point out media as a strong informal institution that influences the desire to travel to a destination, spending behaviour, and the perception of sustainable mobility of females. In practice, the research implicates that tourism advertisers and television creators must make more representations of female autonomy and traveling on their own to evade empirically repetitive gender standards.

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- Ethics Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Media College, Hebei Academy of Fine Arts, approval number HBFR-2025-0037 Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.
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