

The Representation of Middle Class in Chinese Magazine: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, 1995-2021

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Abstract

The discourse of the middle class, which was encouraged by the government and promoted by the media, has become a dream and inspiration for the general public in China since the 1980s. This study employs a multimodal critical discourse analysis framework to examine the representation of the middle class in print advertisements from 1995 to 2021 in a Chinese magazine. van Leeuwen’s Visual Social Actor Network and Socio-semantic Categories are adopted to examine both the visual and linguistic data. The focus is on how such representations relate to the reproduction of class inequality and cultural hegemony in China. The findings suggest that the middle class is represented as a homogenous group of consumers, centered on heterosexual Chinese male adults, urban intellectuals and white collars, who are endowed with high cultural capital and the power to consume. The discussion argues that this homogeneous representation legitimizes the ideology of consumer culture, which is responsible for the establishment and reproduction of social stratification through consumption in China.

Keywords

multimodal critical discourse analysis, middle class, advertisement, consumer culture

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Introduction

Although globally popular and generally well-defined, the term ‘middle class’ in China is set within much ambivalence and controversy. Whether there is a middle class and how it should be defined remain a hot issue for debate. According to Li (2010), there are at least three major perspectives: the government describes the social group as ‘the middle-income stratum’ on the criteria of income and size and is committed to building a financially healthy society through the expansion of its size to include 55% of the population by 2020 (Goodman, 2014a). A different perspective comes from the sociologists, who usually define the middle class based on occupation and therefore favor the term ‘the middle strata’ in an effort to reduce the sense of class antagonism (Anagnost, 2008). The size of the middle strata ranges from 25%-50%, depending on different criteria adopted by different sociologists (Goodman, 2014b). The third perspective comes in the form of public opinion. It seems that the general public is more familiar with the general terms ‘middle class’ or ‘petty bourgeois’, which were initially derived from exposure to the media, particularly advertisements for luxury goods. Chinese perceptions of the middle class are mainly intellectuals, managers and white-collar workers with economic security, cultural superiority and exquisite lifestyles (Zheng, 2007).

It is worth noting that the media representation of the middle class, with its association of high income and high consumption as discussed above, is by no means representative of the ordinary Chinese people in the middle of the socio-economic hierarchy. This kind of representation reflects the lifestyle equivalent to the upper middle class in developed countries, which only accounts for less than 10% of the Chinese population (Li, 2013). Furthermore, the middle class in China is far from a homogenous group, with private entrepreneurs and individual business owners being far less represented than intellectuals, managers and white collars. Also, there is a complex issue of the under-representation of women (Shao et al., 2014), the elderly (Wang, 2013), and the LGBTQ+ groups (Wang and Ma, 2021) as members of the middle class. In light of this, Goodman (2014b) argued that the middle class in China is more of a discourse than a social structure, encouraged by the government to stimulate economic growth and consumption while serving as a mediator for the increasing inequalities between the very rich and the poor.

In the Chinese context, previous research has shown that the middle class is generally portrayed as a positive and ambitious group who are particular about tastes and lifestyles. Advertising often stereotypes the middle class as consumer animals, obscuring the fact that they are also independent individuals and citizens with social responsibilities (He, 2009). This body of research suggests that the media has been instrumental in constructing an ‘imagined community’ that not only binds its members together but also provides a powerful source of motivation, driving people to fulfil their aspirations to become middle class (Guo, 2014). Advertising, as an important means of information, provides and distributes a symbolic system of consumer signs to construct middle class lifestyles and distinguish the middle class from other classes. While the middle class, as readers, establish and consolidate their class identity in their consumer imaginations by reading the media-guided lifestyles (Wang, 2009). Middle class culture is constructed around consumer culture, elite culture and professionalism (Shen, 2008).

This study attempts to discover the multimodal strategies in the discursive construction of middle class in magazine advertisements in China, with a focus on the interaction between the visual and verbal text in the production of meaning. It is a diachronic study focusing on a specific period in the history of the Chinese advertising industry, from 1995 to 2021. CDA is used as the theoretical framework to explore the dialectical relationship between the representation of middle class in advertising and its broader context, reflecting the underlying ideologies and power relations that are promoted in society. It is hoped that the results of the study can contribute to a broader understanding of the middle class discourse in China.

1. The emerging middle class in China: the social-political context

To study the middle class as a discourse is to see it as a socially constituted reality and place it in a situated and contextualized communicative event (Fairclough, 2013). Two phrases are crucial to understanding the emergence of the Chinese middle class: between 1949 and 1979, and after 1979. China has been a society that pays great attention to the social hierarchy since ancient times. 1949 was the year of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The country was built through a proletarian revolution guided by the scientific socialist ideal of the Marxist tradition (Dong, 2018). Class is a central concept in Marxism: class distinction means the exploitation of one social group over another. Therefore, the political goal of Marxism is to eliminate such exploitation by realizing a classless society (Hunt, 1974). A series of measures were taken to reshape and dismantle the social structures that generate socio-economic differences. As a result, the upper-middle class, such as the national bourgeoisie and small business owners, were eliminated; other members of the middle class, such as the petty bourgeoisie, were transformed into peasants or the working class (Li, 2013). Before the Reform and Opening-up in 1979, social stratification was based on family background and political status. Every citizen was officially categorized and provided with a specific class identification (Goodman, 2014a). Furthermore, a household registration system called hukou divided the Chinese people into two categories—urban and rural. Under such a system, people with rural hukou were called peasants, even though some of them were not engaged in agricultural work. Most Chinese must live where they were born, and peasants could not move to urban areas or enjoy the benefits of urban life (Goodman, 2014a). Meanwhile, people with urban hukou were further divided into workers and cadres. There were significant differences between these two identities in terms of income and social prestige (Li, 2019).

The Reform and Opening-up in 1979 was marked by the introduction of market forces into the socialist economic system. The government loosened the class relations and social structure by replacing the class-struggled-centered principle with the development-centered principle (Anagnost, 2008). When class background ceased to matter as much, new criteria based on income, wealth and property were introduced as the main criterion of social stratification (Zhou and Chen, 2010). Sociologists have agreed that the development of the socialist market economy resulted in considerable inequality and increased stratification in China (Goodman, 2014a; Li, 2019).

In 1997 the World Bank reported that China saw a significant increase in its Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, rising from 0.28 in the 1980s to 0.49. This change is noteworthy for two main reasons. Firstly, the rate of growth is unprecedented in any society. Secondly, it indicates that economic inequality had reached a critical level, typically identified as 0.4, which poses a threat to social stability (Anagnost, 2008). It was during this period of transition that the new generation of middle class was born. They are generally young, highly educated, and possess professional skills. Many are employed in foreign-funded companies and in burgeoning industries like finance, insurance, information technology, and other high-tech sectors. They often reside in major cities and have high purchasing power.

The emergence of the middle class was not only a natural outcome of the market economy but more importantly depended on government support (Anagnost, 2008). The middle class is seen politically as the foundation of social stability; economically as a key driver of consumption and domestic demand; and culturally as the main body of modern culture (Li, 2019). Therefore, cultivating a consumption-oriented, professional middle class has been a major goal of the Chinese government in recent years. The move to identify the middle class and promote a middle class society has been legitimized by a variety of political discourses. Instead of using the term ‘middle class’, the government has opted for ‘middle-income stratum’ and ‘middle-income group’ to define the social group based on income. The ambivalence in terminology reflects the ideological ambivalence in the perception of social class in China (Dong, 2018). The new language address social inequality without assuming social antagonism (Anagnost, 2008). The current political discourse of the ‘China Dream’ aims to build a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way by 2020. A key indicator is to expand the share of the middle-income group and gradually form an olive-shaped distribution pattern (Li, 2015).

But how much income makes a person middle class? Given the large disparities between urban and rural areas, and among regions, it is difficult to arrive at a national standard. This ambiguity about the term and its standards makes it difficult for the Chinese middle class to develop a shared class identity, class consciousness, or class culture (Li, 2010). Based on a study of the social and self-identity of the middle class in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing and Wuhan, Shen (2008) pointed out that nearly 80% of the respondents’ perception of the middle class is influenced by the media, especially advertising. The media portrays them as individuals who can afford spacious homes, luxury cars, work in modern office buildings, and vacation abroad. Such representations provided concrete examples of the middle class status based on consumption. Consequently, in the Chinese context, the term middle class has lost its political implications and has taken on popular meanings developed through the media (Miao, 2017).

Since it was the advertising industry that introduced the concept of the middle class to Chinese audiences in the late 20th century (Miao, 2017; Shen, 2008), it is argued that the representation of the middle class in advertising is a key element in understanding the dynamics behind the discursive construction of the middle class in China.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs multimodal critical discourse analysis as the theoretical framework to investigate how the middle class is depicted in print advertisements in magazine and how such representations relate to the reproduction of class inequality and cultural hegemony in China. A multimodal analysis is necessary when it comes to analyzing advertising texts as it highlights the distinctive functions of both visual and linguistic texts and, more importantly, ‘the joint effect of all modes combined to make meaning’ (Jewitt et al., 2016:140).

2.1. Visual Social Actor Network

The Visual Social Actor Network (van Leeuwen, 2008) is used to answer the question of ‘how is the middle class depicted’. This network is widely used to discover how people are visually represented as ‘others’ in racist discourse and other culturally prejudiced discourses (van Leeuwen, 2008). It starts with the question of who is excluded and who is included in the representation. This is important because not acknowledging the existence of certain kinds of people means that they are unimportant or irrelevant to the discourse. Social actors are categorized according to their biological features, such as age, gender and race, and cultural features such as occupation. The aim is to see which categories are excluded, and which categories are more frequently depicted as the middle class. It then examines the types of actions in which social actors are involved and the cultural connotations associated with these actions. Finally, it explores whether the social actors are represented as homogenous groups or as specific individuals. van Leeuwen (2008) argues that the strategy of showing people as homogenous groups denies their individual characteristics and differences.

2.2. Socio-semantic Categories

In addition to visual representation, a classification of referential strategies based on van Leeuwen (1996)’s Socio-semantic Categories is used to examine how the middle class is linguistically represented in the advertising text. A number of categories are identified to classify people with different ideological effects, such as synthetic personalization, individualization, functionalization, relational identification and classification, which we explain below.

3. Materials and Procedures

This research is designed as a diachronic study (1995-2021), focusing on the representation of the middle class in the print advertisements of San Lian Life Week magazine, hereafter referred to as Life Week. The magazine was chosen for its prominence, relevance, and audience. Life Week is a leading news magazine in China. As its slogan suggests – a magazine and the lifestyle it advocates - it aims to promote a particular way of life to its readers. More specifically, it directly targets the emerging middle class in times of social transition (Qi, 2006). As one of the most effective ways for advertisers to present

their products to the emerging middle class, Life Week provides a large number of advertisements with a variety of products for this study.

We selected 1995 as the starting point for data collection because it marked the magazine’s founding year, and 2021 was when our research began. Additionally, this period coincided with the Chinese advertising industry’s significant growth and depoliticization after years of neglect. Scholars have subsequently mapped four phases in China’s advertising development, closely linked to economic and political liberalization and reform (Yao and Weng, 2019):

- Rapid development (1992-2001)
- Full development (2002-2009)
- Before digital transformation (2010-2014)
- After digital transformation (2015 to present)

The data encompassed all four of the above-mentioned phrases, offering a comprehensive picture of the representation of the middle class in magazine advertisements. We employed stratified sampling and the constructed year approach to select the sample for the research. Following Riffe et al. (1996), the data were first stratified into four sub-periods corresponding to the development of China’s advertising industry, with each sub-period treated as a constructed year rather than a calendar year. Constructed year sampling involves randomly selecting one issue from each month, for example, one issue from January, one from February, and so forth (Riffe et al., 2019). Using SPSS software’s sampling function, we randomly selected 48 issues across the four constructed years, with 12 issues per year. Only commercial advertisements with human images are collected. Ultimately, our corpus comprises 291 print advertisements with 38,158 Chinese characters.

Table1. Distribution of print advertisements in Life Week magazine in four constructed years.

Month	1 st Constructed Year (1995-2001)		2 nd Constructed Year (2002-2009)		3 rd Constructed Year (2010-2014)		4 th Constructed Year (2015-2021)	
	No. of Issue	Date of Publication	No. of Issue	Date of Publication	No. of Issue	Date of Publication	No. of Issue	Date of Publication
January	1/2001	1/1/2001	3/2005	17/1/2005	1/2014	6/1/2014	3/2021	18/1/2021
February	4/2000	29/2/2000	6/2008	25/2/2008	7/2013	18/2/2013	8/2019	25/2/2019
March	5/1999	15/3/1999	10/2004	3/3/2004	11/2011	14/3/2011	11/2021	15/3/2021
April	7/2000	15/4/2000	14/2002	8/4/2002	15/2010	12/4/2010	17/2020	27/4/2020
May	19/2001	7/5/2001	17/2002	6/5/2002	18/2012	7/5/2012	19/2015	11/5/2015
June	22/2001	4/6/2001	23/2005	27/6/2005	22/2013	3/6/2013	25/2018	25/6/2018
July	13/2000	15/7/2000	25/2006	10/7/2006	26/2012	2/7/2012	26/2019	1/7/2019
August	17/1999	30/8/1999	31/2003	4/8/2003	33/2014	18/8/2014	35/2016	29/8/2016
September	17/1997	15/9/1997	37/2004	13/9/2004	38/2011	19/9/2011	37/2017	11/9/2017
October	37/2001	17/9/2001	37/2009	12/10/2009	41/2012	15/10/2012	41/2016	10/10/2016
November	22/1999	30/11/1999	44/2005	28/11/2005	45/2014	10/11/2014	48/2020	20/11/2020
December	24/1999	30/12/1999	51/2004	20/12/2004	51/2010	20/12/2010	50/2018	17/12/2018
Total	50		92		98		51	

4. Findings: visual and linguistic representation of middle class in advertisements

4.1. Visual representation

In this section, the human images in the advertisement are coded into different categories suggested by van Leeuwen’s (2008) Visual Social Actor Network. We argued that these models are representative of the media-constructed image of the middle class because they are portrayed in contexts and settings that are relatable to many middle class individuals. There are ways in which people can be visually categorized: whether they are categorized in terms of biological or cultural characteristics (van Leeuwen, 2008). Biological categorization refers to characteristics that are ‘biological’, ‘in the blood’, and hence ‘ineradicable’ (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 146). Age, gender, race and ethnicity are such characteristics that are closely related to the study. Cultural categorization is signified by means of standard attributes. They connote values and associations attached to a particular sociocultural group. The characteristics in the choice of representation are considered to be cultural, and therefore changeable (van Leeuwen, 2008). In this study, we focused on occupation as the main attribute. We relied on the verbal and visual cues to judge the occupation and counted the number of occurrences of different occupations. The aim of this section is to see which categories are excluded, and which categories are more frequently used in the advertisements to depict the middle class.

Table 2. Summary of the biological categorization

Biological Categorization	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	Adult	242	83.2%
	Children	17	5.8%
	Elderly	2	0.7%
	Adult and children	27	9.3%
Gender	Male	117	40.2%
	Female	66	22.7%
	Male and female	101	34.7%
	Cross-dressing	2	0.7%
Race and ethnicity	Asian	200	68.7%
	Caucasian	63	21.6%
	Caucasian and Asian	16	5.5%

The results of the biological categorization analysis (see Table 2) show that, the majority of the represented participants are adults (n=242, 83.2%), exclusively male (n=117, 40.2%) and Asian (n=200, 68.7%). In terms of cultural categorization such as occupation (see Figure 1), almost 40% (n=115) of the advertisements do not specify the occupation of the person portrayed. For example, in the Samsung advertisement in Figure (1), although the man’s occupation is unknown to us, his body shape, clothing, hairstyle, and preference for cultural goods (in this case, the latest mobile phone) all point to an upper-middle class lifestyle. Here social stratification works through consumption, not through occupation.

In addition, the most frequent occupations are celebrities, professionals and technicians, office workers and managers, typical middle class occupations with high cultural capital.

According to the findings of the visual analysis, it can be said that the representation of the middle class is rather homogenous, centered on the heterosexual Chinese male adult, urban intellectuals and white collars, endowed with high cultural capital and the power to consume. They are portrayed as the desirable ‘new normative figure of citizenship’ (Anagnost, 2008, p. 499). Their individuality may seem to disappear behind what categorized them—the clothes, the make-up, the status accessories (van Leeuwen, 2008).

Meanwhile, the middle class tends to be portrayed in social activities associated with leisure rather than work. 78.9% of the advertisements showed the middle class in non-occupational settings, such as at home or outdoors, engaged in leisure activities such as shopping, traveling, and exercising. Only 21.3% of the advertisements depicted the middle class in occupational settings and engaged in actions associated with work, suggesting that leisure is far more prominent than work in constructing the self-identity and group identity of the Chinese middle class. In other words, the middle class is defined by money spent, not money earned. The Mini advertisement in Figure (2) shows a group of people camping in the countryside: they have pitched their tents on a mountaintop, are sitting around a table with wildflowers and various delicacies on it, drinking hand-brewed coffee and red wine and chatting away. As the advertising slogan says: ‘One car, one family. Mini lovers travel together’, suggesting that anyone who could afford to buy a Mini belongs to the same group. This finding is consistent with the assumption that leisure is an important form of postmodern consumption (Guo & Wang, 2009), and that the media play a crucial role in disciplining the emerging middle class into a lifestyle that centered on leisure and consumption. The consumerist ideology prevalent in the advertisement challenges traditional Chinese values that emphasize frugality, contentment and hard work (Zhu, 2018).



Figure (1): Samsung



Figure (2): Mini

Exclusion

Bourdieu (1984) used the term ‘classification struggle’ to clarify the symbolic function of everyday consumption, and only through these constant, reciprocal acts of social classification that social collectives are born. The homogenous representation of the middle class in advertising inevitably raises the question of exclusion: who is represented and who is not. As can be seen from the data, older people are underrepresented, despite the high respect for this group (Michael et al., 2017) and their growing population in China. They are often backgrounded and marginalized in the frame, stereotyped as grandparents or golden agers (Eisend, 2022). Women are less represented than men and are more associated with domestic products, with 22.7% of advertisements featuring female models compare to 40.2% featuring male models. Gender role stereotyping, a common strategy in advertising, ignores the significant progress women have made in China and reflects their disadvantaged position in society (Zhang et al., 2009). Local models are preferred to foreign models. Advertisers believe that it is easier for audiences to identify with local models than with foreign ones, and that too many Western faces could alienate the Chinese audiences (Shao et al., 2014). This preference for Chinese models and spokespeople reflects a nationalistic tendency to preserve a distinct Chinese identity in a global market (Zhao and Belk, 2008).

The LGBTQ+ groups are excluded from representation, except for the creation of comic effects. Looking more closely at the gender categories, it is found that the representation of the middle class in advertising adheres to the rigid boundaries of the gender binary. The only two cases of cross-dressing are found in the advertisements for Xelibri, which was launched in 2004. The advertisement was set in a near future where everyone has the same face. The actor played several roles all by himself: in Figure 3, he was the groom, the father, the photographer, and cross-dressed as the bride and her mother; in Figure 4, he was dressed as a schoolgirl, but star posters with his images were all over the wall. The Chinese version



Figure (3)-(4): Xelibri

is almost identical to other versions around the world, except that the language is translated into Chinese. Cross-dressing is used here as a creative strategy to achieve the effect of being eye-catching, funny, and fashionable. The exclusion of the LGBTQ+ groups is a direct result of the institutional power exerted by the government, which reflects its relative indifference towards the LGBTQ+ community. The Chinese government introduced two separate bans to restrict verbal and visual representations of homosexuality in public media: in 2008 and 2016, banning the media coverage of homosexuality and the depiction of homosexual characters in TV shows, respectively (Wang and Ma, 2021). Under the guidance and censorship of the government, any 'deviant' sexuality described by the Chinese media is seen as a betrayal of mainstream culture (Zhang, 2014).

Exclusion also occurs within the members of the middle class. According to Goodman (2014a), the middle class is fragmented and heterogeneous, including a variety of private entrepreneurs, individual business owners, professionals and technicians, and office workers. However, only white collars (n=32, 10.7%), professionals and technicians (n=50, 16.7%) are frequently represented in the data, other members of the middle class such as private entrepreneurs and individual business owners (n=4, 1.3%), who may earn similar income are seldomly represented. Meanwhile, the middle class lifestyle is an urban phenomenon that completely excludes rural residents. Unlike white-collar workers, professionals and intellectuals, who tend to be urban and highly educated, the composition of private entrepreneurs and individual business owners is more complex, with a high proportion of rural residents, and the level of education also varies. It is a common phenomenon in China to show disdain for the wealthy landed gentry who usually have bad taste (Dong, 2018). The practice of everyday consumption serves as a 'vehicle through which they symbolize their social similarity with and their social difference from one other' (Weininger, 2005:483). The exclusion and distinction from people with bad taste manifested in the representation of the middle class. The individual business owner Uncle Wen in Figure (5) is a tea plantation owner who sells expensive handmade black tea. He wears a traditional Chinese Tang suit with a dragon pattern, which shows his identity as a member of his time-honored tea-making family. The tea set he uses also signifies good



Figure (5): He Yi He

taste and refinement. In the advertisement, he is represented as a tea expert rather than an individual business owner.

Not acknowledging the existence of certain people means that they are unimportant or irrelevant to the discourse (van Leeuwen, 2008). In the advertisements, the representation of the middle class is deliberately and selectively controlled by the magazine and the advertiser to serve their own interests. It is safer for advertisers to follow social conventions by using stereotypical and easily identifiable representations than to challenge them (Shao et al., 2014). Advertising effectiveness is achieved through messages that are quickly understood by the audience. The prevalence of heterosexual Chinese male adult representations reflects the male-centered, heterosexual hegemonic and nationalist trends in the Chinese society, and the representations of urban residents with high cultural capital and the power to consume legitimize the ideology of the consumer culture, which is responsible for establishing and reproducing social stratification through consumerism.

4.2. Linguistic representation

The linguistic analysis data comprises 38,158 Chinese characters extracted from 291 advertisements. The analysis aims to examine how the middle class is referred to and thus represented in the advertisement. van Leeuwen’s Socio-semantic Categories (1996) are used to identify the main referential strategies. This process was conducted using MAXQDA, a computer-assisted analysis tool, to ensure a reliable statistical calculation of the frequency of each strategy. The analysis revealed 11 categories containing 981 words or phrases, with some categories exhibiting low frequencies. Table 3 displays the most prevalent strategies, which account for 93.6% of the total.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage of different referential strategies

Referential Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
pronouns	616	62.8%
functionalization	103	10.5%
individualization	66	6.7%
identification: relational	74	7.5%
identification: classification	59	6.0%
Total	918	93.6%

Pronouns

The most frequent referential strategy in the verbal text is the use of pronouns (n=616, 62.8%). Further analysis in Table 4 shows that the middle class is most often addressed directly as ‘you’ and its honorific, while the advertiser as the corporate ‘we’ (Fairclough, 1989). This referential strategy is what Fairclough (1989) calls synthetic personalization, which is widely used in advertising to construct the relationship between the advertiser and the consumer. Synthetic personalization involves a number of linguistic strategies,

such as addressing the audience directly as ‘you’ and using imperative sentences (Patrona, 2015), as shown in Example (1). The strategy has an ‘interpellation or hailing’ effect (Althusser, 1971: 90): although the pronoun ‘you’ is used by the advertiser to address to the mass audience, people who read it feel that it applies to them specifically. The middle class audience are conceptualized as a homogeneous group of consumers who will presumably buy the product. Meanwhile, the first person plural ‘we’ also ranks high in the list of pronouns. As shown in Example (2), the text producer is personalized as the spokesperson for the whole company by using the pronoun of the corporate ‘we’. The company is given a unique image through the choice of image, vocabulary and syntax. In this way, both the consumer and the company are individualized and personalized.

Example (1): Want to bring the wonderful film and television experience on your lap? Get yourself a laptop based on Intel Centrino mobile computing technology (*Life Week*, 28 September 2005).

Example (2): What can we do for you? NEC mobile phone, know you and I (*Life Week*, 20 December 2004).

Individualization and Functionalization

The second and the fourth most common strategies are functionalization (n=103, 10.5%) and individualization (n=66, 6.7%). Individualization refers to the referential strategy of referring to social actors as individuals. Functionalization refers to the situation where social actors are categorized in terms of identities and functions that they share with others, in terms of what they do, for example an occupation or a role (van Leeuwen, 2008). In many societies where individuality is highly valued, whether people are nominated as individuals or assimilated as groups makes a big difference in critical discourse analysis (van Leeuwen, 2008). As in Example (3), the verbal data show that the advertisements tend to individualize celebrities and elites. They are not only nominated by name, but also functionalized by their occupation, such as brand ambassador, world champion, expert and professor.

Example (3): IBM ThinkPad. The world’s most innovative thinkers’ choice. Prof. Xiaoming Gu, social anthropologist and historian, editor-in-chief of The Wisdom of China. (*Life Week*, 4 August 2003).

The middle class is also individualized and functionalized as customers of the products. While their names may not be widely recognized, their occupations are typical of the middle class, such as engineer, designer, manager, and doctor. Example (4) features a Besturn automobile advertisement that introduces three owner representatives, each identified by name and occupation as a professional or technician. These individuals symbolize the target consumers of the product. Through their first-person perspectives on the products, they create a sense of belonging and relatability with the audience, making them easily persuadable. The strategy of individualizing and functionalizing the middle class increases the credibility and the persuasiveness of the product.

Example (4): ‘What you see is a brief shock, but for me, it is a long exploration and practice’-- Besturn owner Zhang Jian: 39 years old, information engineer of China Aviation System (*Life Week*, 20 December 2010).

Identification

Similar to functionalization, identification is another referential strategy to categorize individuals. It occurs when the social actors are defined not by what they do, but by what they are (van Leeuwen, 2008). Two types of identification are found in the advertising text: classification and relational identification. Classification involves categorizing social actors based on major societal categories such as race, gender, class, and age (van Leeuwen, 2008). In verbal text, social actors are often classified by age (e.g., children, babies, teenagers), gender (e.g., men, girls), and race (e.g., Asian), as seen in Examples (5-7). These advertisements highlight a particular classification because they are directly targeted at them.

Example (5): Give baby better protection. Please use a child safety seat (Life Week, 18 August 2014).

Example (6): Men love black, pure black Nokia 8210 launched with passion (Life Week, 7 May 2001).

Example (7): 65°Golden Ergonomics: Lying and sitting bathing angles designed for Asian (Life Week, 15 October 2012).

Relational identification represents the social actors in terms of their personal, kinship or work relationships with one another (van Leeuwen, 2008). In the data, individuals are primarily categorized by kinship and personal relationships, as illustrated in Example (8). This is achieved by using possessive pronouns to indicate these relationships, such as your family, son and daughter, friends and lovers. Furthermore, social actors are classified as consumers based on their business relationship, such as customers, owners, users, partners or members. Example (9) demonstrates how individuals are addressed as if they are already established consumers.

Example (8): China Merchants Bank VISA Platinum Credit Card understands your needs and brings you and your family an ‘extraordinary travel experience’ (Life Week, 18 February 2013).

Example (9): The Siemens always thinks one step ahead for its customers (Life Week, 3 June 2013).

Discussion

The research employs multimodal critical discourse analysis to examine how the middle class is represented in magazine advertisements both visually and linguistically. The visual analysis reveals that the representation of the middle class is rather homogenous, focusing on the heterosexual Chinese male adult, urban intellectuals, and white-collar workers. The linguistic data indicates the same conclusion of homogeneity--the middle class is most often addressed directly as *you*, portraying them as a homogenous group of potential consumers. From the representation, we can see that the middle class is not much about politics or a social structure in the way that classes have previously been understood in China, and instead took on popular meaning evolving around consumption.

The homogenous representation of the middle class brings to light issues of inequality and exclusion. To begin with, there is the problem of stereotypical representations of age and

gender. Older individuals, women, and LGBTQ+ groups are underrepresented, with the latter often only used for comedic effect. Next, only white-collar workers, professionals and technicians with higher cultural capital are often represented, while other middle class members such as private entrepreneurs and individual business owners—who may earn similar incomes—are rarely represented. Moreover, the middle class lifestyle is an urban phenomenon that completely excludes rural residents. This exclusion suggests that being a middle class is exclusive, leading people to believe that they are one and the same. Higher education and urban citizenship (especially home ownership) are key symbols of the middle class, a determinant of social status.

Beyond marketing considerations such as target audience and market appeal, explanations for such representations can be found in the sociocultural contexts closely associated with the middle class discourse in China. For political reasons, the existing political landscape has constrained their room for action, giving the middle class the dual characteristics of being ‘the vanguard of consumption and the rearguard of politics’ (Zhou and Qin, 2010: 85), suggesting a group of consumer animals who lack passion and a sense of engagement in politics and public affairs. To minimize the political connotations of ‘middle class,’ the government adopted the term ‘middle-income group,’ encouraging people to stratify society based on income and consumption. For economic reasons, the rise of the Chinese middle class parallels with the expansion of globalization, cultivating a consumer market and corresponding values, lifestyles, and behavioral patterns based on consumption. Consumption, once synonymous with waste, extravagance and decadence in the Mao era, became a key part of the country’s development strategy to expand domestic demand and stimulate the national economy (Zhou and Chen, 2010). For cultural reasons, the stereotypical depiction of gender indicates that traditional patriarchal social norms and the established gender hierarchy persist in Chinese society, despite the significant advancements in women’s rights and awareness in recent years (Zhang et al., 2009). Additionally, the preference for local over foreign models highlights a nationalist tendency in China, emphasizing the promotion of traditional culture, values, and modern achievements (Zhao and Belk, 2008). Lastly, the exclusion of rural residents and lifestyles reflects the urban-rural dichotomy in China. By presenting urban life as modern, affluent, and ideal lifestyles, rural life—with its significant disparities in income, living conditions, and quality of life—is considered irrelevant to the discourse.

The impact of the representation of the middle class is far-reaching. First, it has played a crucial role in cultivating and facilitating the consumer culture in China, which is responsible for establishing and reproducing social stratification through consumption (Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas and Isherwood, 1980). The consumerism ideology highlights the symbolic nature of goods and the fluidity of identity. Goods are now defined not only by their functionality but also by the meanings they convey (Baudrillard, 1998), and social identity becomes a matter of choice, where one can assume any identity through the purchase and display of certain consumer goods (Jameson, 1983). Thus, we are defined not by our traditional, given identities such as class, gender or age, but in terms of what we buy and what values we hold. The focus on fluid identities through consumption, according to Machin and Richardson (2008: 208), ‘took us away from the concrete reality about economic exploitation and unequal access to resources and power’. While the inequalities may appear to stem from differences in cultural capital and consumer power, they are, in

reality, a result of deep-seated structural inequalities that restrict access to resources such as employment, education, and urban residence (Anagnost, 2008).

Second, the homogenous representation implies that only those with money to spend, higher education and urban citizenship are recognized as ‘the legitimate culture’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 199) -- desirable, worthy, and distinguished. It is a matter of concern that such associations may lead to cultural hegemony for the aspiring middle class in China, limiting their perceptions of what it means to be middle class and what they should aspire to in their own lives. Evidence of this can be found in the rat race in education and the obsession with homeownership. In China, education is often equated with social status. Not only middle class parents but also working class parents spare no effort to invest in their children’s education, to avoid leaving them in a disadvantageous position (Anagnost, 2008). Children are caught up in test scores and school admission, as if that is the only way to succeed. Meanwhile, home ownership is recognized as a key indicator of middle class status and as a prerequisite for marriage. Many people take out large mortgages, resulting in long-term debt and financial strain for families. People labelled as middle class do not necessarily feel a sense of belonging. Instead, they may experience feelings of deprivation and insecurity due to the perceived expectations associated with the middle class status (Miao, 2017). Their disposable income does not allow them to afford the carefree middle class lifestyle depicted in the media or that they aspire to.

Finally, the homogenous representations of heterosexual Chinese male adult, urban intellectuals, and white-collar workers reproduce and reinforce existing social hierarchies and inequalities related to gender, education and regional differences. In China, there were huge gaps between urban and rural areas, among coastal and inland regions. Moreover, there were increasing income disparities among age groups, and unequal job/educational opportunities between genders (Goodman, 2014a). These kinds of representations have marginalized women, LGBTQ+ groups, private entrepreneurs and individual business, and the rural population, overlooking their increasing presence in the middle class. They shape not only how the public perceives these social groups but also how these groups perceive themselves. By setting a narrow normative standard of identity, these representations perpetuate a limited and often misleading image of what it means to be middle class.

Conclusion

While this study emphasizes the power of the media in shaping representation of the middle class and the ideology of consumer culture in reproducing social stratification, it could further explore the agency of consumers in negotiating and contesting the dominant discourse. Today, Chinese young people have found it increasingly difficult to afford houses, expensive cars and other middle-class necessities. Some feel so intimidated by the responsibilities of the consumer culture that they even reject marriage and parenthood. The discourse of the middle class, once the aspiration of the younger generation, has been overshadowed by other popular discourses of resistance, such as *tang ping* (literally meaning ‘to lie down’), which urge Chinese young people to reject the so-called ‘rat race’ and instead choose alternative lifestyles, such as minimalism, as a form of resistance to consumerist values.

This article aims not only to explain why the representation is the way it is, but also to help people consider what alternatives there might be. The findings of the study suggest that the representation reinforces existing inequalities and neglects the heterogeneity within the middle class. This stereotypical and narrow representation is not beneficial to the formation of the middle class identity. It is hoped that the advertisers and the media producers will promote a more inclusive representation of the middle class, including women, rural residents, and other occupational groups. We also hope to enhance readers' critical awareness of the middle class discourse, and the influence and consequences of advertising communication on society and culture. This will enable them to rethink their own identities and notions of the good life, rather than defining it solely in terms of the consumption portrayed by the media.

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