Youth Impact Communication

The Beauty Politics In The Lyrics: How The Definition Of Beauty Changes With Time

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Summary

"Say sorry every time you eat an extra grain of rice, hold your breath to have a thin waist…" Sung by the most popular pop stars Rocket Girls101 in 2018, those seemingly inconceivable scenes are almost the panorama of how young Chinese girls literally are fighting for the size zero. Now what we're seeing is a trend toward an imitation of the standardized body image.

Beauty standards in China were not always this way.

In the past decades, the beauty ideal changed in China. From the chronological perspective, we sent out online questionnaires to different age groups, aiming to collect the most popular songs from the 80s to the 10s. Instead of designing multiple choice questions by providing songs for participants to choose from, we set it as an open question to make participants feel free to write their answer. After data analysis, we found that in selected representative songs the percentage of lyrics describing inner beauty decreased while lyrics describing outer beauty increased over time.

Though the trend is obvious in graphs, the hidden difference between how male singers and female singers perceive beauty ideals remains the same. Lyrics in songs sung by male singers focus more on the attractiveness of appearance while lyrics sung by female singers describe more about inner beauty. For instance, the Braids, one of the few songs sung by male singers among the representative songs, is the most influential popular song sung by Zhihua Cheng in the 1990s in China. Repeating lyrics like "your beautiful braids" and "your charming smile" indicate the focus on the appearance of the girl. Compared with the Braids, Nv Ren Hua, another popular song sung by Anita Mui in the same time period, eulogizes how independent and courageous the woman is.

It was not until recent years that beauty standards— including, but not limited to, thinness — are commodified and scattered throughout young generations. We root this change in beauty standards depicted, noting that the infiltration of idolized celebrity culture has created an association between this unrealistic body size and beauty. Lyrics of popular songs in recent years function as an invisible yet powerful hand, cultivating the body image, which are women's bodies that are very thin, with very long legs and with many of the characteristics unrelated to the more important inner beauty.

Not feeling pretty enough can come from lyrics and is nearly impossible to

ignore as music has a profound effect on the way people all over the country perceive beauty ideals. The beauty standard has to change not just for this current century but also for the future.

In order to combat social stereotypes of beauty, we used more democratized platforms, like social media. Weibo, the most popular social media in China, can have a positive sea change in the way these issues are tackled. Nowadays, a blogger can have a voice as loud as that of the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. We wonder if we also can give voice to the diversity of beauty or to break the stereotype of beauty before more songs like Calorie shape the word beauty in a superficial and astray way. The more we dug into the music industry to explore the change of beauty definitions, the more we are aware that music, or say lyrics, is a double-edged sword. Misleading concepts can sweep over the country via lyrics, then so do healthy and open-minded concepts.

To convey the key message that "Girls should embrace who you are and advocate the diversity of beauty", we composed and performed an original song to strike a chord with the audience. The song shows that inner beauty and "being who you are" are more important than outer beauty. We posted our song on Weibo and other music platforms like Netease Music, which are the most popular platforms with high page views. We also held offline activities like workshops and presentations in our school assembly hall. Since we found that students from other local schools, like Da Qiao Experimental School and Xi Shan High School, were interested in our advertisements reposted in Wechat and QQ and echoed with our concept, we created an online chat group to gather them together. When we held offline activities to deliver speeches and report progress, those students from other local schools also attended and contacted their school counselors to provide venues for us.

Just because you don't fit society's standards of beauty doesn't mean you aren't beautiful. It's important to embrace who we are and work to remind the world that we are allowed to love our bodies the way they are.

Identify the Topic

| Topic Description

"The beauty politics in the lyrics: how the definition of beauty changes with time" is our topic.
Glossier's Body Hero, a plus-size fashion campaign with a plus-size model starring in, is raising people's awareness of body stereotypes. At this moment, the movement propelling size inclusivity—and diversity in general—in beauty is trending upward, but it's still not the norm. At least not yet. It's not just the major beauty giants either. More and more creative media companies and people are aware that what shape the public perception of beauty are Visual and verbal messages. Lyrics, as a type of text passing on verbal messages, is the most popular and influential among teenagers. Like with fashion campaigns, it's a way for people to voice their concerns and be heard. We then decided to explore the changes in definitions of beauty in recent decades via researches into the lyrics from the 1980s to the 2010s.

| Why it is important

After watching that advertisement including over-sized models and the following comments, support or negate, our group is aware that social media has been a reckoning force in pushing the issue along. The more time people's concepts of beauty are influenced by verbal or visual messages presented in social media, the more likely they are to stereotype "Beauty", which is suggested by the concept of "Cultivation Theory". According to the theory, people who watch television frequently are more likely to be influenced by messages from the world of television. The influence goes to such an extent that their world view and perceptions start reflecting what they repeatedly see and hear on television.

As high school students, we want to act to break social norms of beauty and reinforce the concept of "Beauty is limitless" via researches into lyrics. Diversity is a part of the fabric of our country. It's just so important to validate people in all their forms, for people to see a reflection of our world with diversity.

Naomi Wolf, the author of The Beauty Myth, uses the phrase "cultural conspiracy" to argue that women's magazines have played a pivotal role in the selling of the beauty myth. Inspired by the concept introduced in The Beauty Myth, our group is going to evaluate the response from the audience---as

current media users--- after hearing the lyrics. Whether they think the beauty illustrated in the lyrics is biased or not will be recorded in our database for future analysis. We will further analyze all the responses to determine whether audiences are reflective enough to be aware that beauty is limitless.

| Project Objective

Our project aims to raise people's awareness of "Beauty is Limitless" and change stereotypes of beauty standards. We will explore the changes of beauty standards displayed in lyrics of songs from the 1980s to the 2010s, from which we would love to prove that beauty standard is not composed of several fixed superficial rules, which can be easily and widely conveyed by social media. Instead, it is constantly changing under the advancement of a society and can be influenced by many factors, such as globalization.

We propose to determine the high-frequency words indicating outer beauty and inner beauty, for example, "slim", in lyrics via data analysis. Case studies based on popular girl groups like 3Sunshine and Rocket Girl 101 will also be included. The ultimate goal of our project is to advocate the diversity of beauty in society as well as to strengthen the fundamental role of inclusive attitudes which the public should hold towards various kinds of beauty. In order to efficiently publicize our aim, we are going to produce an original song and a music video under the theme.

Identify the Target Audience

Who Are They?

Young generations aged 15 to 28 in China who constantly use social media apps are the target audience of our project. Social media, such as QQ, Wechat, and Weibo, have gained a widespread audience in China. Young adults are the demographic which make up the vast majority of social media users and thus are mostly affected by social media. According to the database, with the booming growth of internet celebrity economy in Weibo, young generations in China use Weibo as the main way to catch up with the latest beauty trends. They constantly check updates on Weibo to follow their idols and their makeups.

Why Are They?

Young generations aged 15- 28 years old are the demographic which make up the vast majority of social media users. To be specific, those "Digital Natives" are the most-affected by social media. They tend to have a clear image of beauty standard. One in three teenage girls feel under pressure to present themselves as having a "perfect" life on social media, a survey has found. In a poll by the charity Girlguiding, 35% of girls aged 11-21 said their biggest worry online was comparing themselves to the idolized image of women. It is thus easier for us to evoke sympathy and change their concepts of beauty standards via advertisement. After researching lots of related papers and surveys, I found that all the studies only focused on young generations in western countries. This is another reason why I deem the research on young generations aged 15-28 years old in the Chinese context is indispensable. At the final stage, we will explore the feedbacks of our target audience to see whether they agree or not by collecting their comments under our music video.

What is your scope?

To ensure the feasibility of the research process and the reliability of our result, our group would like to narrow our scope to young generations aged 15-28 years old in China, who constantly use social media. They can be high school students, parents, or college students.

How to reach them?

Social media, including Youtube, Wechat, and QQ, is our prioritized way to publicize. It's no secret that technology and the digital age we're currently operating within is affecting us all. We teenagers are so interconnected through the apps that come with it that you'd be hard to find an individual who doesn't engage in a digital experience on the daily. School weekly assemblies are the second way we choose to publicize our idea of the project. During the school assembly, all students gather together and tend to concentrate on the speeches we deliver. We can thus reach a large number of target audience at the same time and publicize our concept efficiently. Social video screaming platform, for example, Bilibili, is also our potential choice as it's more inclusive. We aim to teach young audience media literacy through this process.

Identify the Key Message

The Key Message

In short, our key message is "Beauty is Limitless". Our project aims to hold a comprehensive attitude towards beauty. As we study the concept of beauty in lyrics, it becomes apparent that people view beauty differently under the constant changes of social trends, fashion styles, culture and so on. Especially in the era of vast information, diverse styles are encouraged. In this case, defining and standardizing beauty turn unreasonable and limiting, and they also categorize people and blur their individualism. Hence, we strongly advocate to embrace various kinds of beauty.

The Tactics Behind

The key of our tactics is to strike a chord with the audience. All of our advertising products, including speeches, an original song, a music video and posters, aim at arousing audience to recall their own experience. Everyone understands lyrics differently, and they all look for their roles in the words. We've listened to songs, been pleased by songs, cry in songs and yell the song out loud when they tug at our heartstrings, and that's one of the most amazing thing about lyrics and music. Taking advantages in music's strong influence, our project aims to appeal audience' emotions to convey our messages.

Choose the Platform

The Platform Chosen

As an increasing number of web celebrities arise, the vane of "beauty" seems to be grasped in the ones in the spotlight; and lots of people would follow those web stars to perceive what beauty is. Considering this, we prefer to promote our project mainly through the online media, including Micro blog, which target at Chinese society, and Instagram, which aims at the international community. Initiating the propaganda, we will create an online questionnaire survey, spreading through the social media mentioned above, in order to perceive how people define the word "beauty." After collecting and analyzing the data, we would launch into the promote-and-popularize step -- releasing relevant pictures, reports, articles, and music videos according to the reflection from people on different online platforms. In addition to those fascinating posters and thoughtful articles, we will come up with a short and attractive slogan so that people can easily remember our project.

The Alternative Platforms

The alternative platforms we utilize would be offline, which is to publicize the idea among people around us. For instance, we would love to communicate with local high schools to see if there're any chances that they can play our musical videos or let us give a public speech. Besides, we are going to try to contact local television station to seek opportunities to promote our project through radio broadcast and screens on some city squares.

The Criteria to Evaluate

Our criteria to evaluate is based on how effectively our messages can be conveyed and how many people will be influenced by our song via this platform. Our standard is quantified as the number of views of our article on Weibo and how many people are influenced or changed their beauty standards by our advertisement. Our target audience is young people aged 15-28 years old in China. According to our analysis, the most commonly used social media are weibo, WeChat, and Instagram. By using these social media to spread our ideas, we can maximize the attention and influence. On these social media, we can easily upload video, pictures, text and other information to minimize the cost and

finally show our results to the public. We only need to look at thumb up, retweets and views to see the impact of our message. With the built-in comment function of social media, we can know what the public thinks and improve our work. Information related to our topic will also appear on these social media, and we can expand the scope of our publicity through the topic effect of these information.

The Rating Sheet

📄 Rating Sheet

Set the Agenda

Set the Agenda

<Due 3.31> Yang Qianqian&Zu Yining
-To complete articles to publicize our concepts on several social media

<Due 4.1><At school assembly> Zhu Yiwen&Zhang Yuxin
- To connect with local high schools to see if live speeches are possible

<Due 4.5> Zhang Yuxin
- To produce an original song
- To produce a music video

<Due 4.10><At school assembly> Zhang Yuxin&Zhu Yiwen&Yang Qianqian&Zu Yining
- To initiate a second-round publicity with the music video

<Due 4.14> <Online>Zhu Yiwen
- To collect feedbacks from target audience from time to time and hence adjust our plan

Design the Packages

📄 Weibo
📄 Weibo comments 1
📄 Weibo comments 2
📄 Weibo comments 3
📄 Assembly
📄 Assembly2
📄 Assembly3
📄 Workshop 1
📄 Workshop 2
📄 宣传歌曲 Beautiful

Create and Track the Impact

| The Execution Plan

March 18-24
- [Zhang Yuxin] To produce the original song
- [Zu Yining & Yang Qianqian & Zhu Yiwen] To conduct advertisement through social media, including Wechat account, Weibo and etc. Advertising articles are going to be produced and published.

March 25-31
- [All] To publicize our project concept on school weekly assembly.
- [All] To further promote online advertisement.
- [Zhang Yuxin] To produce the original song. The lyrics will be sent to [Zu Yining] to prepare for music video shooting.
- [Zu Yining] To prepare for music video shooting.

April 1-7
- [Zu Yining] To shoot the music video
- [Zhu Yiwen & Yang Qianqian] To negotiate with local high schools to seek opportunities for advertisement.
- [Zhang Yuxin] To connect with local TV station to seek opportunities for advertisement.

April 8-14
- [Zu Yining] To shoot the music video
- [Zhu Yiwen] To enhance publicity within our school.
- [Yang Qianqian] To further promote online advertisement and do data analysis.
- [Zhang Yuxin] To help shooting the music video

April 15-21
- [Zhu Yiwen & Zhang Yuxin] To edit the music video.
- [Yang Qianqian] To further enhance online publicity.
- [All] To prepare for online

| Impact Statistics

Total feedbacks : 415
Total views: 2.3k

Total play count: 2.1k
Likes: 1k
Repost:1k

In all the 415 feedbacks:
28% changed their beauty standards
44% love our original song
18% resonated with our idea
6% admitted their previous stereotypes

Among all our audience:
58% are high school girls
8% are mothers aged 28 and over
31% are college girls aged 19-24
3% are high school boys

📄 Impact Statistics

| Collect Feedback

In all the 415 feedbacks:
28% changed their beauty standards
44% love our original song
18% resonated with our idea
6% admitted their previous stereotypes

The most touching one we received was the feedback from an American woman aged 24 who commented that our song recalled her experience of losing weight and going on a diet. She tried to fit the "perfect size zero" but failed painfully. She said our song was healing and encouraged her to face her own imperfect body.

Review and Reflections

| What Are Successful

Producing an original song successfully, we published it on the online platforms planned before, including the most popular one Weibo. Weeks after our advertisement, we received 2.3k views, 2.1k play amounts, and 415 feedbacks in total. All the data we collected proved that our original song and propaganda was a huge success and influential. In all the 415 feedbacks, 28% changed their beauty standards, 18% resonated with our idea, and 44% loved our original song. The key of our tactics is to strike a chord with the audience. Our audience understands lyrics differently, and they all look for their roles in the words.

Publishing our original song and ideas online made our project an influential one. With the assistance of online media platforms, for example, Weibo, we received approximately 2.3k views. We created a tag in Weibo to give voice to people all around China and encourage them to get involved. Besides, we held offline activities to give speeches to those who suffered from social discrimination and stereotypes. Feedbacks we collected increased weekly and our audience scope expanded unexpectedly. 8% of our audience is mothers aged 28 and over who felt frustrated about their oversized bodies and stretch marks. 3% of our audience are high school boys who admitted their previous stereotypes toward "beautiful girls" and accepted a more diverse definition of beauty.

Here are some comments from our audience. One of the comments is from a pre-college student who had just finished her college entrance exam and wanted to do a double eyelid surgery for "better" appearance. She told us her peers laughed at her small eyes, which made her believe only big eyes like idols could be accepted and loved by boys. She thanked us for spreading the concept of "Beauty is Limitless", which encouraged her to accept her appearance and fight back when her classmates laughed at her. Moreover, she hoped more girls could know "Beauty is Limitless", thus fewer girls would discriminate "imperfect" others or be discriminated. Another unexpected but touching comment is from a girl with scoliosis, a condition in which the spine is curved in a way that is not normal. She was isolated in school because she wore an ugly back brace, which made her unable to wear pretty clothes. She told us it was our song that encouraged her to embrace who she is and she would recommend our song to other scoliosis girls.

Here is the Weibo link: https://m.weibo.cn/5319783556/4354554462153311

What to Improve

We should build a website to advertise our idea and put all the materials together, including our original song, data analysis, feedback collection, and offline activity records. In this way, audience can get a more comprehensive view of what we aim to do via one website. It may attract more audience as things are more organized and appealing.

Summarize Learnings

Just because you don't fit society's standards of beauty doesn't mean you aren't beautiful.

Compared the high-frequency words indicating the definition of beauty in lyrics from the 80s to the 00s via data analysis, we couldn't help but be aware of the stereotype of beauty shaped by lyrics in the young generation's minds. The definition of beauty has been shaped by society's standards and conveyed through a well-accepted form—lyrics---instead of what people actually look like. From the MV to the lyrics inside, music displays a standard of beauty that everyone should look like.

From the chronological perspective, we sent out online questionnaires to different age groups, aiming to collect the most popular songs from the 80s to the 10s. After data analysis, we found that in selected representative songs the percentage of lyrics describing inner beauty decreases while lyrics describing outer beauty increases. While the song Rainbow in drizzles, under-yielding roses from the 80s describes beauty as independent, courageous, and confident, Nv Ren Hua from the 90s describes beauty as caring, charming, and beloved. In recent years, however, lyrics standardizing beauty or even advocating unhealthy diets have swept over the country. Calorie, one of our case studies, is a song sang by the most popular pop stars Rocket Girls101 in 2018. Via the lyrics, the song propagates the misleading way of losing weight by going on an unhealthy diet. The lyrics show the audience how to look like idols by "not eating rice" and "doing the same exercises that celebrities do". Words like "Magical Mirror" and "Heartthrob" mislead girls to care too much about others' opinions and to reach the unrealistic size zero body, which hurt girls' health both mentally and physically.

Though we set "lyrics" as our standpoint to investigate, we find some subtle but appealing musical elements are also constantly changing and influencing public perception when we are exploring. Comparing the song Calorie (2018) with Ugly Beauty (2019), the two songs differ in both the message conveying and musical elements. Calorie standardizes beauty as slim while Ugly beauty

advocates the concept of embracing diversity in beauty definitions. Firstly, the tempo differs: the former one uses the rhythm similar to shouting slogans and brainwashing, which helps audience memorize and accept; the latter one mixes Trap Beat and Rap, which sounds bizarre and indicates innovation and rebellions. Moreover, though both two songs use Pop Vocal, they differ in the image of the singer. Calorie is sung by slim and beautiful pop stars, which again encourages the audience to lose weight and look like those idols; while Ugly Beauty is sang by a singer who acted different roles to satirize social stereotypes.

Analyzing lyrics from the chronological and music interpretation perspective, it's obvious that the importance of inner beauty has been replaced by materialistic wants and our appearance. In 2018-2019, due to star-making activities, fewer songs focus on inner beauty like independent. It is hard to imagine if young generations grow up by comparing themselves to the media's beauty and trying to do anything possible to have that look. They do not realize that their inner beauty matters more than outer appearance. Not feeling pretty enough can come from lyrics and is nearly impossible to ignore as music is the most influential way to convey messages among young people. The beauty standard has to change not just for this current century but also for the future.

But how?

Some singers or songwriters have already realized the standardized beauty and give their voice as 10% songs, like Ugly Beauty and Goddess, have already subverted the stereotype. We high school students, also the grassroots, are looking for the possibility to subvert and the platform to give our voice.

We wonder if we can give voice to the diversity of beauty or to break the stereotype of beauty before more songs like Calorie shape the word beauty in a superficial and astray way. The more we dug into the music industry to explore the change of beauty definitions, the more we are aware that music, or say lyrics, is a double-edged sword. Misleading concepts can sweep over the country via lyrics, then so do healthy and open-minded concepts. To convey the key message that "Girls should embrace who you are and advocate the diversity of beauty", we composed and performed an original song to strike a chord with the audience. The song shows that inner beauty and "being who you are" are more important than outer beauty. We and the society want to see women in media of all different races, dress sizes, and looks. Society's standards of beauty should never decide how women view themselves.

All in all, the ultimate goal of our project is to advocate the diversity of beauty in society as well as to strengthen the fundamental role of inclusive attitudes which the public should hold towards various kinds of beauty. We can't say we totally

succeed, some audience accepted while some didn't, but at least it is a step forward, courageous enough to challenge the social stereotypes.

Appendix

| Presentation File

📄 Presentation File

| Team Credits

Yuxin Zhang
I'm in charge of the production of original song, including writing lyrics,
composition and music technology.

Judge Comments

" I really enjoyed the strategy you used in making your own song to see how that affected the beauty standards. I would have appreciated it if you had included some comments from your respondents so that we could better understand how they "changed their beauty standards." I would have loved a link to the Weibo post so that we could listen to it ourselves! "

" Including a brief definition of "cultivation theory" and the concept you refer to in "The Beauty Myth" would have been helpful in explaining your thought process here; remember not to assume what your readers are familiar with. "

" Did you have a minimum age limit? "

" What a great topic. I appreciate the depth and detail you gave to this project both in the written portion and in the presentation and slide show. Inner beauty is definitely something that teens need to be reminded of as most valuable to the healthy development of a person. I love that you collected titles from your survey to evaluate the high frequency words used in the lyrics and then created a song of your own that targeted the theme of inner beauty. That was an ambitious goal-- would loved to have heard the song you wrote rather than just briefly read the lyrics. One of the questions asked during your presentation was whether you evaluated the difference between male and female artists and how their views of beauty were different. I think that was a valuable question and one you might consider looking into as you further develop this project. Overall you did a thorough presentation and with a topic that clearly has impact on the way teens view themselves in comparison to the unrealistic ideals often created by the entertainment business. Great job! "

" When addressing the topic of gender stereotypes in music, I don't think it's possible to do an investigative report without comparing/contrasting women and men, specifically, how girls sing about girls and how boys sing about girls. While you explained more about your findings during the question-and-answer part of your presentation, I believe they could have made your presentation and report more compelling, especially if there really is an inner and outer divide between how girls are portrayed. Your slides were good and clear, and served well as a basis for discussion. I would have liked to know what other high schools you cooperated with and how. Playing a portion of one of the songs also would have helped, especially as a melody can be catchy in any language (and that is part of why it is so difficult to push back on lyrics). (end of Beatrice comments). "

" Great topic choice, and good execution. Be sure that the way you choosing these songs are scientific and convincing. If you are interested in the topic and want to do in-depth exploration, it could be worthy to evaluate the difference between male and female artists and how their views of beauty were different. But Generally all good! "