

Beyond Beauty: The Socioeconomic and Psychological Impacts of Cosmetic Practices among Youth

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Abstract

In contemporary China, cosmetic consumption among youth reflects more than aesthetic enhancement—it has become a channel for psychological well-being, identity formation, and resistance to traditional social norms. This study explores the socioeconomic and psychological implications of cosmetic practices among 21 Chinese university students aged 18–32. Through qualitative interviews and thematic coding, I uncover how youth use makeup to navigate self-confidence, gender identities, and cultural standards of beauty. Findings suggest a shift from decorative consumption toward expressions of authenticity and self-acceptance. As affordability and ‘natural beauty’ ideals gain popularity, this reflects a broader cultural turn in consumption, suggesting new dynamics between economy, self-expression, and societal change.

Keywords

Youth consumption, cosmetics, cultural turn, gender identity, aesthetic economy, psychological safety.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Chinese cosmetics market has undergone a structural transformation, characterized by both an expansion in scale and a shift in consumer demographics (Zhang et al., 2024). While traditional models, such as the ‘lipstick economy,’ have long interpreted cosmetic consumption as a barometer of economic cycles, where individuals turn to affordable luxuries in times of financial uncertainty, these economic models often simplify consumption as rational responses to macroeconomic conditions (Amiri et al., 2024). What they fail to capture, however, are the deeper cultural and psychological meanings attached to the use of makeup, especially among younger generations navigating new forms of identity, resisting gender norms, and coping with social pressures (Tran et al., 2020).

Among Chinese youth, particularly university students, makeup has become more than a cosmetic tool for enhancing physical appearance. Neither is it used by youth to cater to mainstream aesthetics. It serves as a medium for negotiating self-image, expressing individuality, performing gender, and achieving psychological comfort (Bonell et al., 2021). As the values of authenticity, natural beauty, and self-acceptance rise in prominence, so too does a visible preference for minimal, affordable, and functional cosmetic products (Wang et al., 2021). This evolution in aesthetic taste and purchasing behavior cannot be fully explained by price mechanism or market operation alone (Honelová et al., 2023). Rather, it reflects a broader cultural turn in consumption: It reflects consumers’ self-construction and emotional expression rather than an economic supply-demand balance.

This study addresses a critical gap in current research by examining cosmetic consumption through the combined lenses of cultural sociology, social psychology, and behavior economy. Specifically, it addresses two research questions: What social, psychological, and cultural forces

drive cosmetic practices among Chinese youth today? And how do these practices reflect broader shifts in identity, aesthetics, and the meaning of consumption?

To explore these questions, this research draws on semi-structured interviews with 21 participants aged 18 to 32, all from academic backgrounds in two Chinese prestigious universities. Through a thematic analysis based on keyword coding, the study investigates how these young people interpret and use makeup in relation to self-confidence, social norms, and cultural narratives surrounding beauty. It also considers how these practices intersect with broader social phenomena such as gender-specific norms, workplace pressure, and consumer downgrade trends.

By situating cosmetic use within a dynamic cultural framework, this paper offers new insights into how contemporary Chinese youth engage with products not only as consumers but as meaning-makers. It argues that makeup has become a psychological resource that mediates identity formation and social interaction in ways that challenge traditional dichotomies between utility and decoration, self and society, or economy and culture.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on aesthetic consumption, gendered beauty practices, and the concept of the cultural turn. Section 3 outlines the research methodology and data collection process. Section 4 presents key findings organized into three thematic domains: psychological impact, social negotiation, and economic preference. Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings in the context of cultural and market shifts. Finally, Section 6 concludes with theoretical reflections and suggestions for future research on cultural consumption and youth identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rethinking Cosmetic Consumption

The “lipstick effect” is the traditional economic explanation for the consumption of cosmetics. It suggests that in times of economic downturn, individuals are more in need of an emotional compensation. This inclines people to purchase more affordable luxury items such as cosmetics (Zhang et al., 2024). This is despite the fact that these models tend to reduce the use of cosmetics to a simple cost-benefit calculation (Chae et al., 2021). This leads us to overlook the impact of makeup on the individual. In particular, the nuanced cultural, emotional, and identity-related significance of Millennials (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022).

Recent research in the field points out the limitations of this economic model. They argue that young consumers' preference for affordable products does not necessarily stem from economic hardship. Rather, it reflects a reconfiguration of young consumers' values. Authenticity, emotional stability and personal identity play a central role in cosmetics consumption. This calls for a more refined analytical framework, barring a shift in research focus from monetary logic to the symbolic and psychological functions of consumption.

2.2. Aesthetic Economy and the Cultural Sociology of Beauty

The aesthetic economy appeal is no longer merely superficial—it becomes a form of capital (Sarwer et al., 2019). Individuals consume not only for functionality but also to express and cultivate a desirable self-image. Makeup, in this context, is not simply about enhancing physical appearance, but about producing a socially intelligible and culturally desirable self. (Fioravanti et al., 2022)

Cultural sociologists have further argued that beauty practices constitute a form of identity work. Makeup enables users to align themselves with certain aesthetic codes, gender norms, or lifestyle narratives (Boccardi et al., 2024). Especially in East Asian contexts, where the tension between collectivism and individualism is rapidly emerging, the use of makeup often reflects a negotiation between societal expectations and personal agency (Lasco et al., 2020). Importantly,

a growing number of young consumers are embracing what they describe as ‘natural’, ‘clean’, or ‘bare-faced’ aesthetics—not because of economic limitations, but as expressions of emotional authenticity and psychological comfort (Wen et al., 2021).

2.3. Gender, Power, and Embodied Practice

The gendered nature of makeup consumption has long been a subject of feminist critique. Earlier discourses viewed makeup as a patriarchal tool enforcing female subjugation through objectification (Brooks et al., 2021). “Acting on gender” is reflected in choosing cosmetics based on the dominant aesthetic of the opposite sex. However, recent research has emphasized that women (and increasingly men) are focusing more on personal emotional experiences when choosing cosmetics. This complicates considerations when choosing cosmetics (Atiyeh et al., 2020).

Today, for some young women, makeup is an important means of constantly enhancing their outward appearance (Sarwer et al., 2020). At the same time, the emergence of male cosmetics suggests that aesthetic consumption is becoming a cross-gender phenomenon. This phenomenon breaks the traditional binary association of beauty with femininity. With the emergence of the transgender phenomenon, cosmetics are increasingly seen as a means of empowerment rather than subjugation (Mafra et al.)

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A sample of 21 age respondents was selected. The average age of these respondents was between 18 and 32 years. All were either current students or recent graduates from two top universities in China. Participants came from academic backgrounds in medicine, pharmacy, and biological sciences, fields that are traditionally considered rational and objective, and also related to chemical engineering, which is required for the makeup industry—thus making their reflections on beauty practices particularly insightful within the broader context of science-oriented education and social expectations. These interviewees also had sufficient financial resources, able and willing to buy cosmetics goods. They were also highly educated so that they could expressed themselves clearly.

To ensure variation in perspectives, the sample included individuals of different genders, educational levels (undergraduate, graduate, and early career professionals), and age groups (18–22, 23–28, 29–32). This population possessed both the financial means and the willingness to engage in cosmetic consumption. The diversity allowed the research to capture a broader range of experiences and interpretations related to makeup and appearance management. Table 1 presents the basic demographic distributions of the interviewees.

Tab. 1 Participant Demographics Summary Table

Age Group	Gender	Number of Participants	Education Level	Disciplines
18–22	Male	4	Undergraduate	Biology, Medicine
18–22	Female	3	Undergraduate	Pharmacy, Medicine
23–28/	Male	4	Undergraduate/ Graduate	Biology, Pharmacy, Medicine
23–28	Female	4	Graduate Student	Biology, Pharmacy
29–32	Male	2	Graduate/ Working Adult	Pharmacy, Biology
29–32	Female	4	Graduate/ Working Adult	Pharmacy, Medicine

3.2. Data Collection and Interview Process

Each participant took part in a 30- to 60-minute semi-structured interview, all of which were conducted face-to-face for a better understanding of their thoughts behind verbal expressions. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin and later transcribed for analysis.

Interview questions focused on four main domains:

- Motivations for makeup use (e.g., self-confidence, professionalism, peer influence)
- Perceptions of aesthetics (e.g., natural vs. heavy makeup, trends in beauty standards)
- Gender and identity (e.g., how gender influences makeup choices, opinions on male cosmetics)
- Economic factors (e.g., attitudes toward product pricing, branding, consumption downgrade)

The interviewer created a comfortable environment to encourage openness, with informed consent obtained prior to each session. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study.

3.3. Data Analysis: Thematic Coding and Interpretation

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with a focus on keyword coding to extract and organize key insights from the interview transcripts. The analysis followed these steps: Initial Coding (Open Coding): Keywords and recurring phrases were extracted from transcripts, such as 'confidence', 'natural look', 'social expectations', and 'self-expression'. Categorization (Axial Coding): The open codes were grouped into higher-level categories, including:

- Psychological experiences (e.g., anxiety, safety, empowerment)
- Social and cultural norms (e.g., workplace appearance, gender roles)
- Economic perceptions (e.g., price sensitivity, value orientation)

Theory Construction (Selective Coding): The core themes were then synthesized into a central narrative of cultural transformation in cosmetic consumption, particularly highlighting a shift toward authenticity, minimalism, and emotional expression.

We code through qualitative analysis software. During the analysis, we took care to identify contradictions between different categories of subgroups of people. This improves the accuracy and consistency of the findings. Figure 1 shows the word cloud of the interview transcript.



Fig. 1 Keywords Frequency Word Cloud (Based on Interview Coding)

4. Findings

4.1. Psychological Impact: Makeup as Confidence and Emotional Safety

Many participants described makeup as a psychological buffer that fosters confidence, stability, and a sense of control. Rather than simply enhancing appearance, makeup was used to manage social anxiety and present a composed self. 'I don't wear makeup to change who I am—I wear it to feel like the best version of myself. It's not about hiding flaws, but about boosting my confidence.' (Interviewee #6, Female, Age 23–28)

Several interviewees emphasized the emotional security that makeup provides in public settings, particularly for social interactions or professional events. 'Without makeup, I feel exposed in front of others, like I'm not fully prepared.' (Interviewee #9, Female, Age 29–32)

This sense of psychological safety was not limited to women. Some male participants expressed similar views, especially regarding skincare and basic cosmetic use, which they saw as essential for presenting a clean and composed self. ‘Wearing some light products, like BB cream or concealer, doesn’t make me less masculine. It just makes me feel more refreshed and confident.’ (Interviewee #18, Male, Age 29–32)

4.2. Sociocultural Expectations and the Negotiation of Identity

Interviewees consistently highlighted how social expectations—particularly in academic, workplace, and dating contexts—shaped their decisions about makeup. However, instead of passive conformity, many engaged in active negotiation of gender roles and appearance norms. “There’s definitely a kind of ‘standard look’ that girls are expected to maintain. But more and more, I choose styles that make me comfortable, even if they’re not traditionally pretty.” (Interviewee #3, Female, Age 18–22)

Many participants noted the rise of a “natural beauty” aesthetic. This trend emphasizes skin clarity, minimal color, and transparency—often described as “looking like you, but better.” “Good makeup now doesn’t look like makeup. It just makes you glow a little. I prefer products that highlight my natural features instead of changing them.” (Interviewee #13, Female, Age 18–22)

The practice of makeup is also evolving across gender boundaries. Several female participants welcomed the normalization of makeup among men, seeing it as a challenge to traditional masculinity. “Why shouldn’t boys wear makeup? Everyone wants to look good. I think it’s more about confidence than gender.” (Interviewee #15, Female, Age 23–28)

4.3. Economic Behavior and the Shift toward Cultural Value

While price was a consideration, most participants rejected the idea that they chose cheaper cosmetics due to financial hardship. Instead, they expressed a clear cultural preference for minimalism, functionality, and value alignment. “I don’t need expensive brands. As long as it suits me and feels comfortable, that’s enough.” (Interviewee #1, Male, Age 18–22)

Young consumers were highly attuned to ingredient transparency, ethical values, and brand identity, favoring local or niche brands that aligned with their personal aesthetics and beliefs. “Luxury makeup feels more about showing off. I prefer simple and clean products that match my lifestyle.” (Interviewee #11, Female, Age 29–32)

This suggests that beneath the apparent downgrading of consumption lies a broader cultural upgrade. Affordability is actually a new tendency towards aesthetic choice, rather than a reflection of low consumption levels." Using affordable cosmetics doesn't mean I'm stingy. On the contrary, it's a more cost-effective choice. This choice gives me greater emotional satisfaction." (Respondent #21, female, 23-28 years old).

Tab. 2 Shifting Beauty Logics: From "Perfection" to "Authenticity"

Traditional Beauty Logic	Emerging Youth Logic
Flawless skin	Natural skin tone
Heavy makeup	Light or no-makeup look
Femininity/ Makeup	Gender-neutral practices
Luxury brands	Affordable, clean labels
Hiding imperfections	Expressing personality
Social conformity	Self-expression

5. Discussion

5.1. Cultural Turn in Aesthetic Consumption

Traditionally the act of using cosmetics is to attract the attention of the opposite sex and to show off one's socio-economic status. However, the results of the study show that this explanation is no longer applicable to young Chinese consumers today. There has been a dramatic shift in young people's motivations for using cosmetics. The use of cosmetics is beginning to be influenced by a cultural shift. The motivation for using cosmetics has changed from a traditional social need to a spontaneous personal need.

"Being like yourself" is more important than 'changing' or "being perfect." This aesthetic approach of following one's personal characteristics became popular. Young people began to focus on "natural" and minimalist styles in the use of cosmetics. This shift in values is closely related to China's post-industrial urban youth. Urban youth have to cope with the pressures of education, work and socialization. At this time, make-up becomes a way of emotional expression. This expression is a means of emotional self-regulation and social integration.

5.2. Identity, Gender, and Emotional Capital

The findings also highlight the growing fluidity in gendered beauty practices, where both men and women adopt cosmetics not in response to rigid social scripts, but as part of individualized self-care. Female respondents emphasized empowerment through controlled presentation, while male participants described makeup as a way to feel refreshed or confident without compromising masculinity. This supports recent scholarship that sees beauty work as a form of emotional and symbolic capital, rather than a purely performative practice.

Cosmetic use is thus embedded in broader identity work. It enables young people to align their outward appearance with their inner values and emotional states. This connection between emotional capital and appearance reinforces the notion that consumption—particularly aesthetic consumption—is deeply implicated in self-construction and psychosocial stability.

5.3. Market Adaptation and Cultural Feedback Loops

An important implication of this research is the feedback loop between consumer values and market behavior. As young people favor affordable, ethical, and minimalist brands, cosmetic companies are compelled to adapt. Marketing now emphasizes themes like "real beauty," "transparent ingredients," and "inclusive identity." This represents a reversal of the traditional top-down logic where brands dictate aesthetics. Instead, cultural values generated by consumers are increasingly shaping industry narratives.

These dynamics challenge the assumptions of the "consumption downgrade" discourse. While spending on cosmetics may decline in scale and in unit value, the shift reflects an upgrade in consumers' agency. Price becomes less central than identity alignment, ethical production, and personal resonance. Such behavior suggests that the future of consumer behavior may be governed more by emotional authenticity than material aspiration.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the cultural, psychological, and socioeconomic dimensions of cosmetic practices among Chinese university students and early professionals. Based on qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, it finds that makeup has become a medium of self-expression, emotional comfort, and identity negotiation rather than merely a tool for beauty or luxury.

6.1. Key Conclusions

Cosmetic use among Chinese youth is culturally driven. Chinese youth favor makeup that aligned with their self-image, psychological needs, and aesthetic values rather than traditional

notions of beauty or social expectations. Authenticity and naturalness have replaced perfection as aesthetic ideals. The widespread preference for minimal, “bare-faced” looks reflects a new cultural orientation toward self-acceptance and emotional transparency. Makeup practices are increasingly gender-fluid. Male and female respondents alike used cosmetics to feel comfortable and confident, suggesting a breakdown of rigid gender norms in “doing gender”. Consumption downgrade is not a sign of economic weakness, but a cultural reevaluation. Young people deliberately choose affordable products for their emotional relevance, not because of financial necessity.

6.2. Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the emerging body of literature on aesthetic economy, emotional capital, and cultural consumption, particularly within the Chinese context. It supports the argument that beauty practices are not only shaped by macroeconomic forces or gender norms, but by deeply personal and cultural narratives that evolve with time.

6.3. Practical Implications

The findings carry practical implications. For brands and marketers, it is crucial to understand the emotional motivations behind youth consumption. It is recommended to build authenticity and inclusivity into brand messaging rather than relying solely on status-driven marketing. For educators and public discourse, it is important to promote awareness of diverse beauty standards and challenge narrow ideals that fuel anxiety or insecurity. For policymakers and researchers, it is suggested to consider how beauty practices intersect with mental health, social mobility, and digital identity in the broader landscape of youth development.

6.4. Future Research Directions

Although this study contributes to the broader literature by adding a nuanced understanding of cosmetics consumption, cross-cultural comparisons of aesthetic practices across the East and the West have not been studied. Future research is recommended to expand this study to various social contexts in the path proposed in this study.

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