

## *Original Paper*

# Creating “Us” and Addressing “You”: Linguistic Strategies of Participant Reference in German and Chinese Social Media Advertising

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### **Abstract**

*Social media advertising constructs complex communicative relationships between brands and consumers through strategic deployment of person reference forms. This study examines how German and Chinese cosmetics advertisements employ personal pronouns and person designations to create intimacy, build solidarity, and construct gendered identities. Drawing on 602 advertisements from Facebook and Weibo, the analysis compares Nivea and Nivea Men campaigns across both languages. Results reveal striking cross-linguistic differences: German advertising relies heavily on pronominal reference, creating dialogic relationships through combinations of first-person plural wir (“we”) and second-person plural familiar ihr (“you”). Chinese advertising deploys more person designations, with extensive use of gendered nominal forms for identity construction. German achieves gender targeting primarily through contextual disambiguation and generic masculines, while Chinese employs elaborate person designation vocabulary including kinship terms, diminutives, and internet slang neologisms. These patterns reflect language-specific pragmatic resources and cultural communication norms: German dialogic bilaterality versus Chinese social categorization emphasis. The findings demonstrate that reference form selection constitutes strategic relationship technology reflecting and reproducing cultural values and gendered identities within commercial discourse.*

### **Keywords**

*person reference, personal pronouns, person designations, advertising discourse, cross-cultural pragmatics, German, Chinese, social media advertising*

## 1. Introduction

In digital marketing discourse, the linguistic construction of brand-consumer relationships relies heavily on reference strategies—how advertisers refer to themselves and address their audiences. With social media platforms becoming primary advertising channels globally, cross-linguistic variation in these strategies warrants systematic investigation.

Person reference forms constitute fundamental pragmatic tools through which advertisers construct relationships with audiences, position products, and create discourse communities. In social media marketing, where traditional sender-receiver boundaries dissolve into interactive dialogues, understanding these linguistic strategies becomes crucial for both theoretical and applied purposes.

Research on advertising discourse has established that person reference forms serve crucial pragmatic functions in constructing brand-consumer relationships. Personal pronouns function as devices for personalization and intimacy creation (Motschenbacher, 2006), while forms of address encode social relationships through person and social deixis (Levinson, 1983/2008). However, systematic cross-linguistic comparisons of person reference strategies in social media advertising remain underexplored, particularly regarding the interplay between pronominal and nominal reference forms in typologically and culturally distinct languages like German and Chinese.

This study investigates person reference forms as pragmatic devices in cosmetics advertising discourse, examining how German and Chinese Nivea social media campaigns employ pronouns and person designations to achieve communicative goals. Rather than viewing these linguistic choices merely as grammatical features, this study examines them as strategic tools for addressee construction, community building, and brand positioning.

A person reference form (PRF) is defined as “a phrase consisting of a nominal or pronominal core that refers personally” (Ott, 2017; author’s translation). PRFs encompass three categories: (1) personal deixis (personal pronouns), (2) person designations (nominal expressions referring to persons), and (3) proper names (when applicable).

For example, in the following Example 1, the pronouns *ihr* (“you” [pl.]) and *euch* (“you” [pl./Akk.]) can be identified as recipient-related personal pronouns, *wir* (“we”) as sender-related personal pronouns. Furthermore, in Example 2, the word *Jungs* (“guys”) is recognized as a recipient-related person designation.

**Example 1.** *Damit ihr so jung aussieht, wie ihr euch fühlt, haben wir diese neue Anti-Age Pflegeserie mit Hyaluron für die Männerhaut ab 40 entwickelt. (DE-NM-20201222) (Note 1)*

“So that you look as young as you feel, we have developed this new anti-age care series with hyaluron for men’s skin 40+”.

**Example 2.** *Jungs! Achtet auf eure Routine. Erst reinigen dann pflegen. [...] (DE-NM-20200501)*

“Guys! Pay attention to your routine. First cleanse, then care”.

Three primary questions guide this investigation:

RQ1: How do German and Chinese cosmetics advertisements differ in their quantitative deployment of various person reference forms (pronouns vs. person designations)?

RQ2: What communicative functions do different person reference forms serve in constructing advertiser-audience relationships?

RQ3: How do language-specific features and cultural communication norms influence the pragmatic deployment of reference strategies?

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study analyzes a corpus of 602 product advertisements published by the cosmetics brand Nivea and Nivea Men on Facebook (Germany) and Sina Weibo (China) between March 2018 and March 2022. Table 1 provides an overview of the corpus composition by platform and brand.

**Table 1. Corpus Composition by Platform and Brand**

Language/Platform	Nivea	Nivea Men
German	146	130
Chinese	177	149
Total	323	279

All advertisements were systematically collected from the official Nivea and Nivea Men accounts on Facebook (Germany: @nivea, @niveamen) and Sina Weibo (China: @妮维雅 NIVEA, @妮维雅男士). Only original branded content was included; user comments, shared posts, and promotional reposts were excluded.

PRFs in each advertisement were manually identified and categorized according to the taxonomy outlined in Section 1, distinguishing between sender-referring forms (advertiser self-reference, e.g., *wir* “we”, 我们 “we”) and addressee-referring forms (consumer address, e.g., *ihr* “you” [pl.], 你们 “you” [pl.], *Jungs* “guys”, 姐妹 “sisters”).

Coding was conducted independently by the author with periodic consistency checks. Ambiguous cases were resolved through consideration of contextual factors including surrounding text, visual elements, and target audience indicators. Statistical significance was assessed using chi-square tests, with  $p < 0.05$  indicating significance and  $p < 0.01$  indicating high significance.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Overall Distribution Patterns: A Quantitative Overview

#### 3.1.1 Cross-Cultural Comparison

Table 2 provides an overview of the quantitative use of both types of PRFs in the German and Chinese advertising corpora. The data reveal a highly significant cross-cultural difference ( $p < 0.01$ ). German

advertising employs substantially more personal pronouns for bilateral reference between advertiser and audience, while Chinese advertising relies heavily on substantive person designations primarily targeting audience groups.

**Table 2. Distribution of PRF Types in German and Chinese Corpora**

PRF Type	German	Chinese	Significance
Personal Pronouns	548	409	$p < 0.01$
Person Designations	81	264	
Total	629	673	

### 3.1.2 Within-Culture Gender Target Analysis

As shown in Table 3, the difference in PRF usage between Nivea and Nivea Men advertisements in the German corpus is not statistically significant. This suggests that the target audience gender does not significantly influence PRF distribution patterns in German advertising.

**Table 3. Distribution of PRF Types in German Corpus by Target Audience**

PRF Type	Nivea	Nivea Men	Significance
Personal Pronouns	327	221	$p > 0.05$
Person Designations	51	30	
Total	378	251	

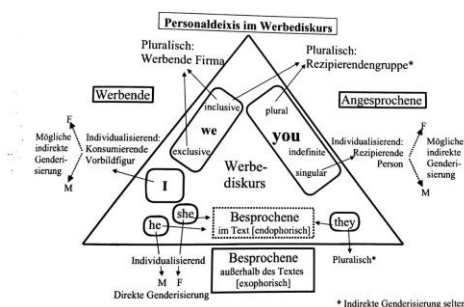
In contrast, the Chinese corpus shows highly significant gender effects ( $p < 0.01$ ). As shown in Table 4, female-targeted advertising uses more pronouns, while male-targeted advertising employs more person designations.

**Table 4. Distribution of PRF Types in Chinese Corpus by Target Audience**

PRF Type	Nivea	Nivea Men	Significance
Personal Pronouns	253	156	$p < 0.01$
Person Designations	87	177	
Total	340	333	

### 3.2 Personal Pronouns

Advertising discourse involves bilateral communication between advertisers and recipients, requiring personal pronouns for reference to both parties. The main function of personal pronouns in advertising is to personalize discourse and create intimacy (Motschenbacher, 2006). Figure 1 presents the typical functions of personal pronouns in advertising discourse as identified by Motschenbacher (2006).



**Figure 1. Functions of Personal Pronouns in Advertising Discourse (from Motschenbacher, 2006)**

### 3.2.1 Sender-Referring Pronouns

Table 5 presents the distribution of sender-referring personal pronouns in German and Chinese corpora.

**Table 5. Distribution of Sender-referring Pronouns in German and Chinese Corpora**

Pronoun Type	Form	German		Chinese	
		Nivea	Nivea Men	Nivea	Nivea Men
1st person sg.	ich, mein, 我	0	0	1	6
1st person pl. (exclusive)	wir, uns, unser, 我们	132	60	4	1
1st person pl. (inclusive)	wir, uns, unser, 我们	18	6	5	4
3rd person	es, sie [pl.], 它, 他们	0	0	0	2
Total		150	66	10	13

In German advertising, advertiser self-reference relies exclusively on first-person plural forms: *wir/uns* (“we”/“us”) and the possessive *unser* (“our”). In most cases, the exclusive *wir* is used. Example 3 illustrates this pattern, where the first-person plural *wir* (“we”) and the possessive pronoun *unser* (“our”) refer exclusively to the advertiser. The pronoun *wir* personalizes the advertiser, creating the effect of direct personal address. This communication appears even more personal when the exclusive *wir* combines with the second-person plural *ihr* (“you” [pl.]), as shown in Example 1. This combination suggests a dialogue between advertiser and recipient, expressing sympathy for the audience (Motschenbacher, 2006).

**Example 3.** *Bei unserem NIVEA Deo Natural Balance Bio Aloe Vera setzen wir auf die Kraft von natürlichen Inhaltsstoffen und schonen außerdem Ressourcen. (DE-N-20201016)*

“With our NIVEA Deo Natural Balance Bio Aloe Vera, we rely on the power of natural ingredients and also conserve resources”.

Compared to German advertising, Chinese advertising rarely employs personal deixis for advertiser self-reference. As shown in Table 5, the exclusive 我们 (“we”) appears only four times in Chinese Nivea advertising and once in Nivea Men advertising. The singular first-person pronoun 我 (“I”) is similarly rare, occurring once in Nivea advertising and six times in Nivea Men advertising.

Despite these cross-linguistic differences in exclusive forms, both German and Chinese advertising employ the inclusive wir/我们 (“we”), as demonstrated in Examples 4 and 5.

**Example 4.** *Mit dem Alter verändern sich die Bedürfnisse unserer Haut. Die NIVEA Anti-Falten Tagespflegen begleiten euch ab 45 Jahren und versorgen eure Haut mit allem was sie braucht.* (DE-N-20200915; Fehler im Original; Hervorh. ZL)

“As we age, the needs of our skin change. NIVEA Anti-Wrinkle Day Care accompanies you from age 45 onwards and provides your skin with everything it needs”.

**Example 5.** [Emoji] 各位bro 有没有相同的经历 工作日熬夜加班 周末也常贪玩晚睡 [Emoji] 眼周细纹让我们承受着超越年龄的“成熟”。(CN-NM-20201223L)

“[Emoji] Do all you bros have the same experience: staying up late working overtime on weekdays, and often staying up late having fun on weekends too? [Emoji] Fine lines around the eyes make us endure “maturity” beyond our years”.

In contrast to the exclusive *we*, which distinguishes the advertiser from the target audience, the inclusive *we* creates a shared perspective and sense of community, referring to a collective encompassing both advertiser and addressee. Motschenbacher (2006) identifies the solidarity-building function of the inclusive *wir* (“we”) which establishes emotional connection between advertisers and recipients and promotes group belonging (Vesalainen, 2001). As Examples 4 and 5 illustrate, the inclusive *we* is used generically to appeal to shared human needs. This usage aligns with the positive politeness principles (Motschenbacher, 2006) and expresses solidarity with addressees (Wales, 1996).

### 3.2.2 Addressee-Referring Pronouns

Tables 6 and 7 present the distribution of addressee-referring pronouns across both linguistic contexts.

**Table 6. Distribution of Addressee-referring Pronouns in German Corpus**

Pronoun Type	Form	Nivea	Nivea Men
1st person pl. (inclusive)	wir, unser	18	6
2nd person sg.	du, dein	20	4
2nd person pl.	ihr, euer	157	151
Total		195	161

**Table 7. Distribution of Addressee-referring Pronouns in Chinese Corpus**

Pronoun Type	Form	Nivea	Nivea Men
1st person pl. (inclusive)	我们, 大家	13	16
	你	188	112
2nd person sg.	妮 (gendered) <sup>a</sup>	18	0
	你们	6	5
2nd person pl.	妮们 (gendered) <sup>a</sup>	1	0
Reflexive	自己	22	14
Total		248	147

<sup>a</sup> Homophonic substitution of 你 with brand name character 妮

As demonstrated in Section 3.2.1, both German and Chinese advertising employ the inclusive *we* to establish shared perspective with the audience. Beyond this similarity, the most frequently used addressee-referring pronouns in both corpora are familiar second-person forms: *ihr* (“you” [pl.]) in German and 你 (“you” [sg.]) in Chinese. Neither corpus contains formal second-person pronouns (*Sie* in German or 您 in Chinese), reflecting advertising’s modern preference for familiar address that emerged in the 20th century (Gieszinger, 2001). Chinese advertising additionally employs the reflexive 自己 (“oneself”), which functions independently to reference the addressee. The following subsections examine these patterns in detail.

- German Plural *ihr* vs. Chinese Singular 你

As Table 6 shows, both German Nivea and Nivea Men advertisements predominantly use the second-person plural *ihr* (“you” [pl.]) or the corresponding possessive *euer* (“your” [pl.]) (see Examples 1 and 4). In contrast, Chinese advertisements favor the singular second-person form 你 (“you” [sg.]) for audience reference (Table 7). Both familiar forms constitute important discursive means of establishing empathy and closer relationships with target audiences (Marko, 1995). While the plural form emphasizes collective address to the recipient group, the singular form serves an individualizing function. As Examples 6 and 7 demonstrate, this degree of individualization is further enhanced when the pronoun 你 (“you” [sg.]) receives attributive modification in Chinese advertisements.

**Example 6.** [...] 带上妮维雅透明防晒气雾, 自信、优雅的你, 绝对是人群中最亮眼的 “白”!  
(CN-N-20180628)

“[...] Bring along Nivea transparent sunscreen spray, confident and elegant you will definitely be the most dazzling “fair one” in the crowd!”

**Example 7.** [...] 今夜是个大鱼大肉的不眠夜，熬夜的你也一定要记得爱护自己的肌肤 [...] (CN-NM-20200124)

“[...] Tonight is a sleepless night of feasting and revelry, you who stay up late must also remember to care for your own skin [...]”

- Gendered Wordplay through Homophonic Substitution in Chinese

Gender targeting through personal pronouns and wordplay appears in Chinese Nivea advertising. As Example 8 illustrates, the second-person pronoun 你 (nǐ, “you” [sg.]) is replaced by the character 妮 (nǐ, which is not a personal pronoun but the first character in Nivea’s Chinese brand name 妮维雅 (Níwéiyǎ). These two characters are homophonic (differing only in tone), so the substitution does not significantly impair comprehension. The character 妮 contains the female radical 女, giving it the semantic feature [+female]. This wordplay simultaneously genders the target audience as female and creates intimacy through brand-personalized address. No corresponding gendered wordplay targeting male audiences appears in the Chinese Nivea Men corpus.

**Example 8.** 肌肤干燥暗沉的季节，妮的必备护理单品囤好了吗？ (CN-N-20200927)

“In the season of dry and dull skin, have Ni’s (your) essential care items been stocked up?”

### 3.3 Person Designations

The term *person designation* refers to a lexical class of expressions used to name people according to various semantic or functional aspects, including kinship terms (*mother, father, child*), occupational designations (*midwife*), titles (*mayor, pope*) and evaluative expressions (*fool, bigmouth*) (Bußmann, 2008). Within advertising texts, person designations can serve multiple functions.

First, similarly to second-person pronouns, they can directly address advertising recipients (Motschenbacher, 2006). As Example 2 demonstrates, recipients are addressed with the person designation *Jungs* (“Guys”).

Second, person designations can serve indirect addressing of the target audience. A person designation can linguistically embody a specific reference group with which advertising recipients can or wish to identify. In such cases, person designations function as an indirect addressing strategy characteristic of contemporary soft-sell advertising (Motschenbacher, 2006). Within indirect audience addressing, various factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, or lifestyle orientation can be used to generate audience rapport. In Example 9, rather than employing direct address such as *for you*, the advertised product is positioned as *für Weltenbummler* (“for globetrotters”), a group with whom the target audience can or wishes to identify. In Example 10, the gendered person designation 男人 (“men”) serves indirect addressing, positioning the target audience as identifying with masculine identity.

**Example 9.** Für alle Weltenbummler—unser neues Pflegeset ist perfekt für unterwegs! [...] (DE-N-20200305)



“For all globetrotters—our new care set is perfect for on the go! [...]”

**Example 10.** 进入最冷的三九天，能刚能抗的真男人，面对凛冽的“冰冻模式”，也绝不能面子问题上含糊了事！妮维雅男士水活系列，蕴含深海黄金藻精华和玻尿酸，一套解决冬季肌肤干燥紧绷问题。(CN-NM-20190109)

“Entering the coldest days of winter, real men who are tough and resilient, facing the bitter “freezing mode”, absolutely cannot be careless about facial matters! Nivea Men Hydro Active series, containing deep-sea golden algae essence and hyaluronic acid, one set solves winter skin dryness and tightness problems”.

### 3.3.1 Distribution of Person Designations

As outlined above, audience address may be accomplished through both gender-neutral (e.g., *Weltenbummler* “globetrotters”) and gendered person designations (e.g., 男人 “men”). Gendered person designations mark audience gender as communicatively relevant and reference the audience in gender-specific ways. Gender-neutral person designations are neither lexically nor socially gendered and exhibit no gender marking. The generic masculine (Note 2) is provisionally classified as gender-neutral, although many studies have questioned its gender-neutral reference (Ferstl & Kaiser, 2013).

Contemporary German advertising additionally employs a third category: gender-inclusive person designations that explicitly mark gender diversity. This category, responding to German-language debates about *geschlechtergerechte Sprache* (“gender-fair language”), includes paired forms (e.g., *Mitarbeiter und Mitarbeiterinnen* “[male] employees and [female] employees”), the gender asterisk (e.g., *Mitarbeiter\*innen* “employee\*s”), and other forms reflecting gender diversity. While these avoid masculine bias, they—unlike gender-neutral forms—foreground gender diversity as communicatively relevant. No equivalent category appears in Chinese advertising.

As shown in Section 3.1.1, quantitative comparison of person designations in the German and Chinese corpora reveals a pronounced cultural difference. The Chinese corpus contains 264 person designations, whereas the German corpus contains only 81 (Table 2). Table 8 categorizes these designations according to gender specificity. The difference in gendered person designations between the two corpora is highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), with Chinese advertising employing substantially more gendered forms than German advertising.

**Table 8. Distribution of Person Designations by Gender Specificity in German and Chinese Corpora**

PD Type	German	Chinese	Significance
Gendered	27	229	$p < 0.01$
Gender-neutral / gender-inclusive	54	35	
Total	81	264	

The following analysis examines gender-specific influence on person designation use within each corpus. Table 9 presents the distribution of person designations in the German corpus by brand. Of the 51 person designations in the German Nivea advertising, 10 are identified as gendered and 41 as gender-neutral or gender-inclusive (including 20 generic masculines). Of the 30 person designations in the German Nivea Men advertising, 17 are gendered while 13 are gender-neutral or gender-inclusive (including 6 generic masculines). The difference in gendered person designations use between Nivea and Nivea Men advertising is highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), with male-targeted advertising employing proportionally more gendered forms.

**Table 9. Distribution of Person Designations by Gender Specificity in German Corpus**

PD Type	Nivea	Nivea Men	Significance
Gendered	10	17	$p < 0.01$
Gender-neutral / gender-inclusive	21	7	
Generic masculine	20	6	
Total	51	30	

The Chinese corpus reveals a contrasting pattern. As Table 10 shows, of the 87 person designations in the Chinese Nivea advertising, 78 are gendered and 9 are gender-neutral. In Chinese Nivea Men advertising, 151 of 177 designations are gendered and 26 are gender-neutral. Despite the higher absolute frequency in Nivea Men advertising, the proportional distribution shows no significant difference ( $p > 0.05$ ).

**Table 10. Distribution of Person Designations by Gender Specificity in Chinese Corpus by Target Audience**

PD Type	Nivea	Nivea Men	Significance
gendered	78	151	$p > 0.05$
gender-neutral / gender-inclusive	9	26	
Total	87	177	

### 3.3.2 Gendered Person Designations

Following Motschenbacher's (2006) categorization, gendered person designations can be further classified as directly or indirectly gendered. Directly gendered person designations carry the semantic feature [+female] or [+male]. Indirectly gendered person designations are lexically gender-neutral but are understood stereotypically or prototypically as gendered.

- Directly Gendered Person Designations

Directly gendered person designations linguistically represent individuals or groups with respect to their gendered nature. They categorize the target audience as female or male and, where applicable, characterize them according to additional aspects (Ott, 2017). To represent different femininities and masculinities, words carrying the denotation [+female person] or [+male person] can be further connoted through parameters such as age, occupation, etc. For example, male person designations differentiate between *man*, *boy*, *gentleman*, *lad* etc. The same applies to female person designations such as *lady*, *woman*, *girl*, *gal*, etc. Directly gendered person designations thus enable targeted addressing of the target audience with respect to their gender and additional gender-specific representation through further parameters, depending on which words are employed.

Table 11 presents the directly gendered person designations identified in the German corpus. The feminized form *Botschafterin/Botschafterinnen* (“female ambassador(s)”) is the most frequently used directly gendered person designation in the German Nivea advertisements, explicitly representing the female target audience. Additionally, the female simplex *Frauen* (“women”) appears once. In comparison, German Nivea Men advertising most frequently employs the simplex *Männer* (“men”) to refer to the male target audience. The directly male-gendered simplexes *Jungs* (“guys”) and *Papa* (“dad”) each appear once.

**Table 11. Directly Gendered Person Designations in German Corpus**

<b>Nivea</b> (frequency)	<b>Nivea Men</b> (frequency)
Botschafterin/Botschafterinnen	Männer “men” (8)
“female ambassador(s)” (8)	Jungs “guys” (1)
Frauen “women” (1)	Papa “dad” (1)

Compared with the German corpus, Chinese advertising exhibits considerably greater variety in directly gendered person designations. Table 12 presents all directly gendered person designations in the Chinese corpus, ordered by frequency.

**Table 12. Directly Gendered Person Designations in Chinese Corpus**

<b>Nivea</b> (frequency)	<b>Nivea Men</b> (frequency)
小仙女(们) “little fairy/fairies” (16)	兄弟(们)/Bro/哥们 “brother”/ “brothers” (74)
女孩/女孩纸/少女/Girls/女生 “girl”/ “girls” (16)	(真)男人/男士/Men “man”/ “men” (44)
姐妹/集美/桃妹们 “sister”/ “sis” (9)	型男/靓仔 “stylish man” (16)
都市丽人/都市 OL “urban beauty”/ “urban office lady” (4)	男生/男孩子/小伙/Boy/仔 “boy(s)” (12)
女人 “woman”/ “women” (3)	男神 “dreamman” (1)
	渣男 “unfaithful man” (1)

## 糙汉子 “rough man” (1)

In the Chinese Nivea corpus, the expressions 小仙女 (“little fairy”) and 女孩/女生/少女/Girl (“girl”/“girls”) are most frequently used to represent the female target audience. Both terms contain the lexeme 女 (“female”), which carries the denotation [+female]. Additionally, both encode the denotation [+young] through the lexemes 小 (“small”), 孩 (“child”), 生 (“youth”), and 少 (“young”). The person designation 小仙女 (“little fairy”) in Chinese culture also carries the connotations [+beauty] and [+wisdom], attributing beauty and youthfulness to the female target audience. Other frequently used female person designations in Chinese Nivea advertising are 姐妹 (“sister”/“sis”) and 都市丽人/都市OL (“urban beauty”/“urban office lady”).

In comparison, the Chinese Nivea Men corpus is dominated by the kinship term 兄弟 (“brother”/“brothers”), followed by the generic expression 男人 (“man”/“men”) and 型男 (“stylish man”). Terms exhibiting the denotations [+male] and [+young], such as 男生 (“boy”), are used comparatively rarely in the Chinese Nivea Men corpus.

Comparing directly gendered person designations across German and Chinese corpora yields the following findings:

#### 1) Man/Men as Generic Expression in Both Corpora

In both German and Chinese Nivea Men advertising, the generic expressions *man/men* (German: *Männer*, Chinese: 男人) are predominantly used to refer to the male target audience. The genericity of these person designations lies in their reference not to specific individuals but to the category of men as a collective (see Examples 10 and 11). As directly gendered person designations, they contribute decisively to linguistic *doing gender*, prescriptively symbolizing male group identity across contexts (Motschenbacher, 2006). In comparison, the corresponding generic expressions *woman/women* are rarely used in the Nivea advertising of either language.

**Example 11.** *Für Männer, die kraftvolles und gestärktes Haar wollen: Strong Power Shampoo von #NIVEAMEN.* (DE-NM-20210422)

“For men who want powerful and strengthened hair: Strong Power Shampoo from #NIVEAMEN”.

Gender stereotyping with such generic expressions is particularly evident in the Chinese Nivea Men corpus, where various gender-specific attributions are employed in the linguistic co-text. Example 10 illustrates this pattern, where real men are stereotyped as possessing toughness and resilience.

#### 2) Kinship Terms for Solidarity-Building within Gender Collectives in Chinese Advertising

Kinship terms such as 姐妹 (“sister”/“sis”) and 兄弟 (“brother”/“brothers”) are employed in the Chinese corpus (see Examples 12 and 13), with the male kinship term 兄弟 (“brother”/“brothers”) representing the most frequently used person designation in the Chinese Nivea Men advertising. These kinship terms enable gender-specific direct addressing of the target audience. Additionally, kinship terms, similar to first names and diminutives, are “situated in close-register language use” (Ott, 2017;

author's translation), thereby promoting solidarity-building within respective gender collectives.

**Example 12.** #妮的护肤课#熬夜追剧 通宵唱K 抛开工作嗨了一个周末 周一的状态又双叒 Down 到全靠化妆和咖啡苦苦支撑? 姐妹们不要慌, 我在这里为你撑腰~ (CN-N-20181126)

"#Ni's Skincare Class# Staying up late binge-watching series, singing karaoke all night, forgetting work for a fun weekend, then on Monday relying solely on makeup and coffee to get by? Sisters, don't panic, I'm here to support you~"

**Example 13.** 炎炎夏日, 无论上班出勤还是休闲度假, 肌肤问题兄弟们都要格外注重啊。妮维雅 Deep 深层洁面洗去油光, 还有妮维雅男士水活畅透套装, 清爽保湿, 给你夏日最劲凉的呵护, 随时保持肌肤好状态。 (CN-NM-20180718)

"In the hot summer, whether commuting to work or on vacation, brothers, pay special attention to skin issues, brothers. Nivea Deep Cleansing Cream removes excess oil, and the Nivea Men Active Hydration Set provides refreshing moisture, giving you the coolest summer care and maintaining your skin in good condition at all times".

### 3) Stereotyping of Women with Youth and Beauty in Chinese Advertising

Various person designations carrying the denotations [+female] and [+young] are employed in the Chinese Nivea corpus, particularly 女孩 ("girls") and 少女 ("maiden"), both frequently used for referencing young women. A stereotyping of women with youthfulness can be accomplished through such person designations alone.

Furthermore, person designations such as 集美 ("sis-beauty"), 都市丽人 ("urban beauty"), and 小仙女 ("little fairy") explicitly link femininity with beauty stereotypes. The word 集美 (jíměi) particularly embodies the female beauty stereotype. This phonological neologism derives from the kinship term 姐妹 (jiěmèi, "sisters") through homophonic substitution. In Chinese internet jargon, the neologism is widely used as a form of address for women. The two characters 集 (jí) and 美 (měi) literally mean *collective* and *beauty*. The compound thus implicitly references a group of women as collective beauty, simultaneously invoking kinship solidarity (through phonetic connection to 姐妹) and aesthetic ideals.

#### • Indirectly Gendered Person Designations

Indirectly gendered person designations refer to all person designations that, while lexically gender-neutral, are nevertheless understood prototypically as gendered due to societal conceptions, stereotypes, and role expectations regarding gender (Motschenbacher, 2006). Such gender-stereotypically associated person designations both reveal and perpetuate gender-specific stereotypes. Table 13 presents all indirectly gendered person designations in the German corpus that refer to advertising recipients.

**Table 13. Indirectly Gendered Person Designations in German Corpus**

<b>Nivea</b> (frequency)	<b>Nivea Men</b> (frequency)
Beauty-Fans (1)	Sportsfreude “sports friends” (1)
	Starke Typen “strong guys” (1)
	Harte Schale “tough shell” (1)
	Barträger “beard wearers” (3)
	Kumpel “buddy” (1)

In the German Nivea corpus, only one indirectly gendered person designation appears: *Beauty-Fans*, which draws on the stereotypical association of women with beauty. The German Nivea Men corpus, by contrast, employs multiple indirectly gendered designations across three stereotyping domains.

First, sports-based stereotyping appears through the person designation *Sportsfreunde* (“sports friends”), addressing male audience via athletic associations. Second, strength-based stereotyping occurs through the person designations *starke Typen* (“strong guys”) and *harte Schale* (“tough shell”). Although both designations are lexically gender-neutral, they are associated more with males through the visual representation of male protagonists in the respective advertiments and the gender-salient Nivea Men advertising context. Third, biological-trait stereotyping appears through *Barträger* (“beard wearers”), referencing the prototypically male characteristic of facial hair growth.

Table 14 presents all indirectly gendered person designations in the Chinese corpus.

**Table 14. Indirectly Gendered Person Designations in Chinese Corpus**

<b>Nivea</b> (frequency)	<b>Nivea Men</b> (frequency)
妮粉 “Ni-fans” (12)	
珍珠糖 “pearl candy” (6)	
包包/小笼包 “little bun” (5)	
宝宝 “baby”/ “babe” (3)	老铁们 “buddy” (1)
紫米 “purple rice” (1)	(lit. “old iron”)
小可爱 “little cutie” (1)	健身达人 “fitness expert” (1)
幸运鹅 “lucky goose” (1)	
白富美 “white, rich and beautiful” (1)	

To address the female target audience, Chinese Nivea advertising predominantly employs various diminutive forms. These encompass general terms of endearment such as 宝宝 (“baby”/ “babe”) and 小可爱 (“little cutie”), the abbreviated brand name 妮粉 (“Ni-fans”), and a series of newly formed compounds referencing sweets and snacks (see Examples 14 and 15).

**Example 14.** 相信很多妮粉都知道妮维雅 Q10 晚安霜，但是你知道什么是 Q10 吗？  
(CN-N-20200110)

“Many Ni-fans probably know Nivea Q10 Night Cream, but do you know what Q10 is?”

**Example 15.** 双鱼座宝宝们在哪里？... #双鱼座#，放到护肤界，就像妮维雅养肤泡一样。 [...]  
(CN-N-20200317)

“Where are the Pisces babies? ... #Pisces#—In the world of skincare, they are like Nivea moisturizing foam. [...]”

The diverse diminutive forms in Chinese Nivea advertising that exhibit female focus serve as direct or indirect address to the female target audience and create a familiar atmosphere of intimacy. As a characteristic of speaking about women and girls (Ott, 2017), they contribute to the linguistic *doing gender* of advertising texts. They can also be interpreted “socio-pragmatically as infantilization and delicatization” (Ott, 2017; author’s translation), attributing tenderness and infantility to women’s images in cosmetics advertising discourse.

Compared with the aforementioned diminutive person designations, gender-stereotyped person designations are rarely employed in the Chinese corpus for either target audience. For the female target audience, the term 白富美 (“white, rich and beautiful”) is used once to portray an idealized feminine role model. Consistent with findings from the German corpus, the only stereotyped person designation in Chinese Nivea Men advertising derives from the sports domain, designating the male audience as 健身达人 (“fitness expert”). Additionally, the male target audience in the Chinese Nivea Men corpus is addressed once with the dialectal expression 老铁们 (“buddy”, lit. “old iron”). Although lexically gender-neutral, this term is used in modern Chinese slang as an informal term of address for close friends, predominantly in male contexts.

### 3.3.3 Gender-neutral and Gender-inclusive Person Designations

As evident from Table 15, the German corpus shows engagement with contemporary gender-fair language through use of gender-inclusive marked forms, particularly in female-targeted Nivea advertising. Male-targeted Nivea Men advertising uses primarily generic masculine forms with minimal inclusive marking.

**Table 15. Gender-neutral and Gender-inclusive Person Designations in German Corpus**

	Nivea (frequency)	Nivea Men (frequency)
<b>Generic masculine</b>	Weltenbummler	Botschafter
	“globetrotter” (1)	“ambassador” (4)
	Baumspender	Kunde
	“tree donor” (1)	“customer” (1)
	Botschafter	Sportler
	“ambassador” (18)	“athlete” (1)

<b>Gender-inclusive (marked)</b>	Botschafter*in	Botschafter und Botschafterinnen
	“ambassador*” (17)	“ambassadors and female ambassadors” (1)
<b>Gender-neutral (unmarked)</b>		Botschafter*in
		“ambassador*” (2)
	die Ersten	Typ Morgenmensch
	“the first ones” (1)	“moring person type” (1)
	Fans	Typ Nachteule
	“fans” (1)	“night owl type” (1)
	Mitglieder	Team Alpin
	“members” (2)	“alpine team” (1)
		Team Surfing
		“surfing team” (1)

Generic masculines such as *Botschafter* (“ambassador”) or *Weltenbummler* (“globetrotter”) theoretically offer gender-neutral reference, but contextual factors frequently disambiguate these forms toward gendered interpretations, as Examples 16 and 17 demonstrate. In Example 16, the generic masculine *Botschafter* loses its gender neutrality through co-occurrence with the male-marked integrated person reference form *Männerhaut* (“men’s skin”) and the brand name NIVEA MEN, thus being interpreted as gender-specific. In comparison, the person designation *Weltenbummler* (“globetrotters”) in Example 17 is associated more with a female target audience through co-occurrence with the stereotypically female-associated term *Beauty-Bag* in the linguistic co-text.

**Example 16.** *Ihr wollt einen echten Problemlöser für sensible Männerhaut? Dann testet als Nivea Botschafter kostenlos das neue NIVEA MEN SENSITIV Sofort Effekt Gel.* (DE-NM-20200610)

“You want a real problem solver for sensitive men’s skin? Then test the new NIVEA MEN SENSITIVE Instant Effect Gel for free as a Nivea ambassador”.

**Example 17.** *Für alle Weltenbummler—unser neues Pflegeset ist perfekt für unterwegs! [Emoji] Neben unserer Pflegedusche und der Bodylotion findet ihr auch die Labello Lippenpflege in der Beauty-Bag. Wohin nehmt ihr das Set mit?* (DE-N-20200305)

“For all globetrotters—our new care set is perfect for on the go! [Emoji] In addition to our care shower and body lotion, you will also find Labello lip care in the beauty bag. Where are you taking the set?”

As Table 16 presents, Chinese advertising employs gender-neutral forms primarily through internet slang and youth culture terms (e.g., 打工 “laborer”, 干饭人 “food lover”, 尾款人 “balance payer”). These contemporary neologisms demonstrate brand alignment with digital culture and achieve universality through shared experience-based categorizations.



**Table 16. Gender-neutral Person Designations in Chinese Corpus**

<b>Nivea</b> (frequency)	<b>Nivea Men</b> (frequency)
粉丝 “fans” (1)	粉/铁粉 “fans” (6)
前 600 名 “the first 600” (1)	消费者 “consumers” (4)
网友 “ netizen” (1)	朋友 “friend” (generic) (4)
尾款人 “balance payer” (1)	打工人 “worker”/ “laborer” (2)
人 “person” (1)	小伙伴 “little companions” (2)
成分党 “ingredient enthusiast” (2)	前 15 名/三位 “the first 15/3” (2)
黑炭 Couple “charcol couple” (1)	新手玩家们 “newbie(player)” (1)
小黄人 “little yellow people” (1)	新人 “newcomer” (1)
	干饭人 “food lover” (1)
	少年 “youth” (1)

Within the Chinese Nivea Men advertising corpus, only one person designation was identified whose contextual disambiguation invites masculine interpretation. The term 少年 literally designates young persons of all genders aged approximately 10 to 18 years; an adequate English rendering would be youth. However, given that the female equivalent 少女 (lit. “young female”) is commonly employed for referencing young female cohorts, the term 少年 undergoes pragmatic reinterpretation as predominantly masculine.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 Cross-Cultural Differences in Reference Strategy Selection

The quantitative analysis revealed distinct patterns in reference form distribution between German and Chinese advertising. German advertising demonstrates heavy reliance on personal pronouns relative to person designations, while Chinese advertising exhibits greater use of person designations. This pattern aligns with Motschenbacher’s (2006) observation that German advertising tends toward greater personalization through personal deixis.

German advertising’s preference for personal pronouns suggests a dialogic approach emphasizing bilateral conversation between brand and consumer, employing *wir* (“we”) for advertiser self-reference and *ihr* (“you” [pl.]) for audience address. This strategy aligns with broader German communication norms that value directness, clarity, and inter-personal exchange (House, 2006). The pronominal approach personalizes the advertiser—transforming an abstract corporate entity into a conversational “we” that speaks directly to a “you”—thereby reducing psychological distance and creating the impression of interpersonal rather than commercial communication.

In contrast, Chinese advertising deploys person designations more extensively, reflecting a social categorization approach that positions audiences within elaborate systems of social identity and group

membership. Rather than establishing bilateral dialogue as the primary relational frame, Chinese advertising employs rich nominal vocabulary to place consumers within social categories: kinship-based collectives (兄弟 “brothers”, 姐妹 “sisters”), gendered identity positions (真男人 “real men”, 小仙女 “little fairy”), and contemporary cultural groups (打工人 “worker”/ “laborer”, 干饭人 “food lover”). This strategy aligns with cultural communication patterns that emphasize social positioning, relational identity, and group-based categorization (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998).

Gender-specific targeting strategies differ markedly between languages. German advertising shows no significant gender-based differences in pronoun usage patterns between Nivea and Nivea Men advertisements. However, male-targeted German campaigns employ gendered person designations significantly more frequently than female-targeted campaigns. Chinese advertising, in contrast, demonstrates extensive deployment of gendered person designations across both target audiences.

The striking difference in gendered person designation usage reflects the differential salience of gender as an organizing principle in cosmetics advertising discourse across the two cultures. In Chinese advertising, gender functions as a primary axis for audience construction, with elaborate gender-specific vocabulary enabling precise demographic targeting and identity construction. The extensive deployment of kinship terms, gendered identity labels, and gender-stereotyped characterizations creates what might be termed gender-elaborated discourse, in which masculinity and femininity are continuously marked, categorized, and performed through nominal reference.

German advertising’s minimal gendered person designation usage suggests a different ideological positioning. Contemporary German advertising operates within societal discourse increasingly attentive to gender-fair language (German: geschlechtergerechte Sprache) and gender diversity awareness (Kotthoff & Nübling, 2018).

#### *4.2 Communicative Functions and Relationship Construction*

Beyond identifying what reference forms appear in the corpus, this study’s central contribution lies in explicating how these forms function communicatively to construct specific types of brand-consumer relationships. German advertising’s pronominal dominance creates bilateral dialogic relationships and shared experience solidarity. Chinese advertising’s elaborate person designation system creates categorized identity relationships characterized by social positioning, fictive kinship bonds, and prescribed identity performances.

The analysis reveals three primary functional domains.

##### *Function 1: Personalization and Intimacy Construction*

Both German and Chinese advertising employ reference forms strategically to create intimacy and personalization, but through divergent linguistic means reflecting different cultural models of interpersonal closeness.

German advertising’s personalization strategy operates through pronominal bilaterality and plural familiar address. The combination of sender-referring *wir* (“we”) with addressee-referring *ihr* (“you”

[pl.]) positions brand and consumer as co-present interlocutors engaged in ongoing conversation. Crucially, the plural form allows collective address while maintaining conversational intimacy—a familiar collectivity that balances individual recognition with community membership. This strategy avoids the potential over-intimacy or presumptuousness of singular *du* (“you” [sg.]) while retaining the warmth and closeness of familiar rather than formal address.

Chinese advertising’s personalization operates through a contrasting mechanism: singular individualization with attributive modification. Rather than plural collective address, Chinese advertising frequently employs 你 (“you” [sg.]) with elaborate attributive modifiers that create personalized recognition. These terms linguistically perform individualized recognition of the addressee’s specific characteristics, lifestyle, and identity. This construction creates intimacy through specific acknowledgment rather than collective inclusion. Additionally, Chinese advertising’s creative wordplay—particularly the homophonic substitution of 妮 and 你 in Example 8—creates intimacy through linguistic playfulness and brand name integration. This strategy transforms the standard second-person pronoun into a brand-specific form, creating a sense that communication occurs in a special register shared only between this brand and its audience. The wordplay’s phonological similarity ensures comprehension while the visual distinction (妮 with female radical) simultaneously genders and personalizes the address.

#### Function 2: Solidarity and community building

Both advertising systems deploy reference forms to construct solidarity and community, yet through culturally distinct mechanisms: German advertising constructs community primarily through inclusive first-person plural (inclusive *wir*) and plural second-person familiar address (*ihr*). This usage invokes positive politeness principles that emphasize commonality, shared experience, and group membership (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Motschenbacher, 2006). Chinese advertising achieves solidarity primarily through kinship term deployment, particularly in male-targeted discourse where 兄弟 (“brothers”) appears 74 times. Kinship terms construct fictive kinship relationships, positioning brand and consumer as family members sharing bonds stronger than commercial transactions. This strategy draws on cultural models of *guanxi* (relationship networks) and *jiaren* (family members) that privilege relational bonding over transactional exchange (Yang, 1994).

#### Function 3: Identity Construction and Positioning

Person designations, particularly in Chinese advertising, serve not merely to reference audiences but to construct specific identity positions with which consumers are invited to align. This function operates through what Butler (1990) terms “interpellation”—the process by which discourse hails individuals into subject positions.

Chinese advertising’s extensive deployment of gendered person designations offers a rich array of identity positions: 真男人 (“real men”) are characterized as 能刚能扛 (“tough and resilient”), 小仙女 (“little fairy”) associated with beauty and grace, 型男 (“stylish man”), 集美 (“sis-beauty”). These

are not neutral descriptors but ideologically loaded identity positions that embody specific gender performances and values. By addressing consumers with these terms, advertising performs a double function: it recognizes consumers as already embodying these identities while simultaneously prescribing these identities as aspirational ideals. The interpellative function works precisely through this recognition-prescription duality.

Particularly revealing is the asymmetrical pattern in indirectly gendered person designations. Chinese female-targeted advertising's extensive use of diminutives (including 妮粉 "Ni-fans"; 宝宝 "baby"/"babe", 小可爱 "little cutie", 珍珠糖 "pearl candy") constructs femininity through infantilization and delicatization. As Ott (2017; author's translation) observes, such diminutive forms attribute tenderness and infantility to women's images in cosmetics advertising discourse, positioning female consumers as cute, small, sweet, and perpetually youthful. This linguistic strategy serves beauty industry ideology by equating femininity with youth and creating perceived need for products to maintain or achieve these qualities. Significantly, male-targeted advertising demonstrates no comparable diminutive deployment, revealing asymmetrical gender construction strategies.

#### 4.3 The Generic Masculine Debate in German Advertising

The Results section provisionally classified generic masculines (e.g., *Botschafter* "ambassador", *Weltbummler* "globetrotter", etc.) within gender-neutral person designations while noting that their gender-neutral reference has been questioned. German linguistic research has extensively documented that generic masculine forms—grammatically masculine nouns intended to refer to people of all genders—fail to achieve truly gender-neutral mental representations. Experimental studies consistently demonstrate male-biased interpretation: when German speakers encounter generic masculine forms, they preferentially imagine male referents even when the context specifies mixed-gender or all-gender groups (Braun et al., 1998; Stahlberg et al., 2001; Irmen & Kühncke, 1996; Ferstl & Kaiser, 2013).

The present corpus reveals differential deployment of generic masculine versus gender-inclusive forms across target audiences. Female-targeted Nivea advertising shows nearly balanced usage of generic masculine (e.g., *Botschafter* "ambassador") and gender-inclusive forms (e.g., *Botschafter\*innen* "ambassador\*"). Male-targeted Nivea Men advertising shows heavy preference for generic forms. This asymmetry suggests advertisers perceive gender-inclusive language as more relevant or expected in female-targeted discourse.

## 5. Conclusions

This study examined person reference strategies in German and Chinese social media advertising through analysis of 602 cosmetics advertisements from Facebook and Weibo (2018-2022). The findings reveal systematic cross-linguistic differences that reflect fundamentally distinct approaches to brand-consumer relationship construction. German advertising relies predominantly on personal pronouns, creating dialogic relationships through pronominal combinations. Chinese advertising

deploys more person designations, with extensive use of gendered nominal forms for explicit identity construction. These patterns demonstrate that reference form selection constitutes strategic relationship technology shaped by language-specific pragmatic resources and cultural communication norms.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study focused exclusively on cosmetics advertising on social media platforms; patterns may differ in other product categories or advertising channels. Second, the analysis examined only one brand (Nivea), though its prominence in both markets provides a relevant comparative case. Third, diachronic changes in reference strategies were not systematically explored, despite the four-year data collection period potentially capturing evolving practices. Future research should investigate reference strategies across multiple brands and product categories, examine temporal dynamics in advertising language, and explore how reference forms interact with other pragmatic features such as politeness strategies and speech acts. Additionally, reception studies examining how audiences interpret and respond to different reference strategies would complement this production-focused analysis.

### Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CN	Chinese corpus
DE	German corpus
N	Nivea
NM	Nivea Men
PD	Person designation
PRF	Person reference form

### Notes

Note 1. Corpus examples are coded as follows: DE = German corpus, CN = Chinese corpus; N = Nivea, NM = Nivea Men; followed by publication date (YYYYMMDD).

Note 2. The generic masculine (German: generisches Maskulinum) represents a grammatical phenomenon in German whereby masculine personal nouns function as both gender-specific forms for males and purportedly gender-neutral generic forms for all genders.

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