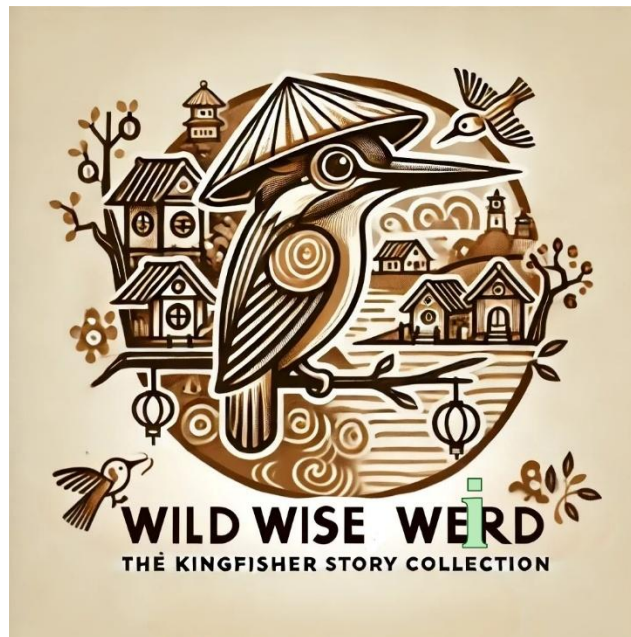


Rewiring Gender Norms? The Paradox of Empowerment in Cyberpunk Microfilm Advertising

Ó Cá

14-04-2025



“With deeper contemplation, the discussion could be pushed even further in the direction of relativity:

– Was Kingfisher eating Fish, or... when Fish entered Kingfisher’s stomach, would it also mean that Fish was eating Kingfisher?

This unexpected question made it not easy for Kingfisher to confirm that when he was about to swallow Fish, was he letting Fish swallow him instead?”

In “Meditation Master”; *Wild Wise Weird* [1]



•••••

Cyberpunk—a genre known for its neon-soaked dystopias and tech-augmented rebels—has found a new medium in microfilm advertisements. These short, cinematic ads, distributed via online platforms, merge futuristic aesthetics with commercial storytelling, offering a compelling space to explore evolving gender narratives. In a recent study, Zhou and Jin [2] analyzed 16 Cyberpunk-style microfilm advertisements (CMA) to examine how gender is constructed and portrayed in this emerging format.

Using qualitative content analysis and drawing on theories of gender performativity [3] and media representation [4], the study reveals a paradoxical dynamic. On the one hand, CMAs challenge traditional binaries by portraying fluid gender identities, unconventional roles, and hybrid “cyborg” bodies that transcend biological determinism. Male characters often display softened emotional traits, while female characters adopt assertive, heroic personas. These defamiliarized aesthetics—enabled by digital technology and virtual realities—create space for reimagining gender beyond conventional scripts.

Yet, this subversive potential is often undermined by persistent stereotypes. Despite their futuristic settings, many advertisements continue to reinforce traditional gender norms, especially in professional hierarchies, emotional dynamics, and spatial representation. Male characters typically dominate technological spaces and decision-making roles, while women are often relegated to decorative or supportive positions [5,6]. The notion of “simulacra” [7]—hyperreal, idealized representations detached from reality—captures how CMAs present gender as both innovative and regressive.

Although some advertisements engage with gender transgression rituals—such as gender-neutral fashion or subversion of romantic roles—these gestures often remain superficial. The commercial drive to appeal to broad audiences frequently results in aesthetic tokenism rather than substantive critique.

This duality positions CMAs as both empowered and constrained. They experiment with new visual and narrative codes of gender yet remain bound by longstanding cultural assumptions. The findings reflect a broader societal tension: as technology reshapes identity and social interaction, cultural narratives of gender evolve unevenly and often contradictorily.

Situated at the intersection of speculative futures and commercial media, this research highlights a critical nature–human nexus. Just as the digital realm enables new forms of self-expression, it also mirrors deep-rooted social structures [8]. For media to serve as a genuine vehicle for gender equity, its aesthetic innovations must be matched by meaningful shifts in representation, embodiment, and power [9].

References

- [1] Vuong QH. (2024). *Wild Wise Weird*. <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BG2NNHY6/>
- [2] Zhou C, Jin B. (2025). Empowered or constrained? Gender narratives in Cyberpunk-style microfilm advertisements. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12, 523. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-025-04618-0>
- [3] Butler J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- [4] Hayles NK. (1999). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in Cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.
- [5] Grau SL, Zotos YC. (2016). Gender stereotypes in advertising: A review of current research. *International Journal of Advertising*, 35(5), 761-770. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2016.1203556>
- [6] Irigaray L. (1993). *An ethics of sexual difference*. Cornell University Press.
- [7] Baudrillard J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan Press.
- [8] Ho MT, Nguyen DH. (2025). Of Kingfisher and Man. <https://philarchive.org/rec/HOOKAW>
- [9] Nguyen MH. (2024). How can satirical fables offer us a vision for sustainability? *Visions for Sustainability*. <https://ojs.unito.it/index.php/visions/article/view/11267>