

## Tween girls' perception of gender roles and gender identities

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Tween girls' perception of gender roles and gender identities: A qualitative study

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# Tween girls' perception of gender roles and gender identities: A qualitative study

## Abstract

Keywords: media influence—socialization—visual sociology—Hong Kong

### **Structured Abstract**

Research paper

#### **Purpose**

The present study aims to examine girls' perception of gender roles and gender identities in Hong Kong.

#### **Design/Methodology/Approach**

A total of 16 girls aged 10 to 12 were asked to take pictures from the media that could illustrate “what girls or women should or should not be; and what girls or women should or should not do”. Qualitative interviews were conducted.

#### **Findings**

Analysis of interviews and images captured found that *tween* girls' perceived gender roles for females were based on a mixture of traditional and contemporary role models. Girls in Hong Kong demonstrated conservatism in sexuality. Sexy outlook and pre-marital sexual relations were considered inappropriate. Tween girls showed concern about global as well as domestic social agendas. They used a variety of media and showed interest in contents primarily for adults.

### **Research Limitations/Implications**

The study was based on a convenience sample. The interviewees came from middle to lower income families, limiting the validity for generalization. Further quantitative study is needed to establish benchmarks.

### **Practical Implications**

This study will help us better understand the kinds of media images that attract the attention of female tweens and what those images mean to them. The study can serve as a guideline for marketing communication targeting this target group, particularly for skincare, beauty, and cosmetic marketers.

### **Originality/Value**

The first novel idea that is being used in this research is the combination of visual method and the application of qualitative methodology to the study of media effects.

The second novel idea is the use of interviewees as data-collectors. The methodology enables us to ask contextually relevant questions and understand the meaning of the images captured. (266 words)

## **Tween girls' perception of gender roles and gender identities: A qualitative study**

### **Introduction**

Hong Kong has a media saturated environment. Television is an obvious source of commercial, social and entertainment messages. In Hong Kong televised messages can be found at home, in various forms of public transportation, inside lifts and lift lobbies, in large public areas such as shopping centers, and on the Internet.

Newspapers and magazines are traditional sources of editorial and advertising content and Hong Kong is a city with a rich diversity of print-based media outlets. Posters and other forms of discrete printed advertisements are nearly ubiquitous in Hong Kong from billboards along side the road to single sheets in train stations and from inside train cars to the sides of double-deck buses. Finally, the Internet has become a staple of life and provides a wealth of text and image driven content from traditionally formulated and produced commercial messages to user-generated content of every imaginable type and configuration.

People in Hong Kong are exposed to images, ideas and stereotypes and the sources go well beyond the perceived singular dominance of television that is found in media effects and content analysis research. Young people, and particularly young women, adolescent girls and *tween* girls (10-12 years olds who are not quite teens but have different interests than younger children), are exposed to messages that tell them how

they should act, how they should look, who they should idolize and the limits of their aspirations. Primary among these messages are advertising, and content analysis research tells us that advertising is filled with gender-based stereotypes and role definitions that may or may not be consistent with social or cultural norms and the development of the woman or girl according to her potential (Moon and Chan, 2002). Media learning research, including Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1986) and Gerbner and his colleagues' Cultivation Theory (1994), tell us that these messages have an effect on the individual's sense of self and behavior. What is missing is an understanding of the process from the message to cognition and behavior through the individual's exposure, attention and perception. This is particularly true in the multi-channel media environment that currently exists globally and is expressed fully in Hong Kong.

Chan and McNeal (2002), and Williams and Williams (2000) discovered a limited literature to build a program of research focused on the consumption, attention and cognition of the media messages. Consumers and advertisers are growing-up in a visual age, and are accustomed to using the computer as a portal into the worlds of information, entertainment, buying, selling, working, and communicating. Images place an important role in each of these spheres of activity (Belk and Kozinets, 2005). The current study introduces an innovative visual method by asking interviewees to

collect images and discuss their interpretation of these images. Using a qualitative approach, the identifies how processes such as social learning occur in the real world and discover ways to more effectively study these processes on a large scale.

Researchers, such as Bandura (1986), have shown that attention and processing are important parts of the theoretical process of social learning. The current study will examine these processes in context in order to more fully develop and explicate the theory in realm terms that are globally relevant.

## **Literature review**

### *The Tween market segment*

Tweens is a sub-teen consumer segment (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003; Siegel et al., 2004). The segment is defined by age and the concept is based on the idea that these children are “in-be-tween” childhood and teen-hood (Cook and Kaiser, 2004; Siegel et al., 2004). Most commonly tweens are defined as 8-12-year-olds (Siegel et al., 2004). In the present article, we focus on the 10-12-year-olds, which we consider to be the older part of the tween segment. This phase of life is of particular interest because of the salience of sexuality during this phase, not just for the young people themselves, but for the adults who impose all sorts of disciplinary practices on them (Ho and Tsang, 2002). Tweens are also considered to be powerful influencers of their parents’ consumption as well as consumers with a considerable direct consumption of

their own (Andersen et al., 2008). Lindstrom (2004) proposed that the global direct – and indirect – tweens’ consumption was no less than 1.18 trillion US dollars in 2003.

Although some scholars considered the tweens a global market segment, recent empirical studies found that tween consumption and responses to marketing communication were motivated differently in cultures of individualism and collectivism (Andersen et al., 2008).

### *Gender and gender equality*

While sex is a biological phenomenon, gender is a psychological and social phenomenon that describes the cultural associations and expectations relating to one’s biological sex (Rice and Dolgin, 2005). Sex differentiation takes place as children gradually learn to be masculine or feminine according to culturally established gender identification expectations and their interpretation of them (Trepanier-Street, Romatowski, and McNair, 1990). Gender roles refer to the behaviors that men and women are expected to engage (Rice and Dolgin, 2005). According to the social learning theory, a child learns sex-appropriate behaviors through a combination of reward, punishment, direct instruction, and modeling (Bandura, 1986). Media offer many behavioral models for audience members and therefore have the potential to play a part in gender role socialization (Wong and Chan, 2006). Geen (1994) suggested that children might not imitate the behaviors shown in media immediately,



but would store the information in memory and retrieve it in real life situations.

Children were more likely to imitate behaviors performed by the same-sex rather than by the opposite-sex individuals (Bussey and Perry, 1982). Children were also more likely to model behaviors, culturally defined as “gender appropriate” for the child (Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1961).

As a former British colony, Hong Kong has laws protecting women from gender bias in terms of education, employment and pay package (Chan, 2000). Hong Kong provides nine-year free education to all children, both males and females. The proportion of females with tertiary education is similar to that of males (Census and Statistics Department, 2009). Because of improvements in education, economic development, and the influence of the Western feminist movement, the status of women in Hong Kong has achieved significant improvements in the last two decades (Lee and Collins, 2008). In terms of social economical development and availability of education for women, Hong Kong is compatible with many western societies. The female labor participation rate for Hong Kong is 53 percent (Census and Statistics Department, 2009), which is lower than 56 percent in the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). The Hong Kong government takes an active role in promoting gender equality. The Equal Opportunities Commission was established in 1996 and introduced

the Sex Discrimination Ordinance. The Women's Commission was set up in 2001 to promote the well-being and interest of women in Hong Kong (Lee and Collins, 2008).

As a Chinese society, Hong Kong is paternal-oriented. The Confucian Chinese tradition favors males as they are responsible to pass down their family names.

Chinese culture accords greater esteem, privileges, and status to males and there are more restrictive prescriptions for the role of women. Women are expected to submerge their individuality to the family, following the orders of their fathers when young, their husbands when married, and their sons when widowed. The virtues for a woman are defined narrowly in her role as wife and mother (Cheung, 1996). Women occupy only 18 percent of the elected member seats of the Legislative Council in Hong Kong. Females make up over half of the work force in the region but have difficulties in securing leadership positions. There was a sharp fall off in women at higher levels in business (The Women's Foundation, 2006). A survey of 2,010 Hong Kong people found that both male and female respondents are gender stereotypic (Women's Commission, 2003). The authors attributed the finding to the deep-seated notion of stereotype that has been inherited from families, the education system, and the society (Fung and Ma, 2000). In another survey, only 28 percent of respondents considered that women could "fully realize their potential" (Women's Commission, 2003).

### *Theoretical framework*

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986) and Cultivation Theory (Gerbner et al., 1994)

form the bases for a great deal of media effects research from the empirical social scientific perspective. These theories focus primarily on television effects, with little or no consideration of the matrix of media inputs that people encounter in everyday life. Williams and Williams (2000) studies of media consumption and effects in Southern Africa considered media consumption as a complex integration of multiple inputs that reach far beyond television alone. This recognition of multiple media inputs is becoming increasingly important in the Internet age as people are globally decreasing their use of television, increasing their use of the Internet and diversifying their sources of information and entertainment.

Giddens' theory of structuration (1991) proposes that the social structure, represented by traditions, institutions, moral codes, and norms of doing things, is the outcome of the repetition of the decisions of individual choices. However, when people opt to ignore the social structure, or replace them by alternative ways of doing things, the social structure will change (Gauntlett, 2008). With the recent improvement in education of females, and the social environment toward a more gender equal society, male dominance and female submission may be changing in Hong Kong and across greater-China.

## **Methodology**

The method adopted in the current study stemmed from the videographic method introduced by scholars Russell Belk and Robert Kozinets. Together they have hosted the Film Festivals at the Association for Consumer Research since 2002.

Videographic data can be collected by videotaping group or individual interviews, by engaging in naturalistic observation, by using autovideography (where informants videotapes themselves and their lived experiences), by using concealed camera methods, and by taking advantage of opportunities to use interactive video and computer-mediated communications (Belk and Kozinets, 2005). The method used in the current study is a visual adaptation of the autovideography method.

## *Procedures*

Data for the study were collected in March 2009 in Hong Kong. Prior to a face-to-face interview, each interviewee was asked to take 7 to 10 digital photographs each day for a week. The instruction is “please take images from any media that are about *what girls or women should be or should not be, and what girls or women should do or should not do*. These images can come from all sorts of media, including newspapers, magazines, outdoor posters, television programs, MTR posters, web sites, books and so on. The media should be the one you will expose to or sometimes use in your daily lives. The media can be aiming at people like you or aiming at people who are

different from you.”

The image collection week was followed by an interview with a researcher (one of the authors). The interview involves a review of the photos and the interviewees’ interpretation of these images. The list of questions asked is shown in the Appendix.

The interviews took place at public and private venues including sports centers, schools, and interviewees’ homes. The interviews were conducted by the author in a language that the interviewees feel most comfortable. The interviews took 20 to 36 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed or translated into English by a female graduate research assistant hired for the project. The findings from the photos and the interviews were compared across the sample. Marshall and Rossman’s (1999) comparison analysis method was used throughout the data analysis process to link data by constantly comparing and contrasting them (Strauss, 1987).

The transcripts were analyzed question by question for the first two questions for dominant themes in the interview protocol. These themes are the focus of this article.

### *Sample*

Altogether 16 interviewees participated in the study. All interviewees were female Hong Kong girls between the ages of 10 and 12 recruited through personal networks. Ten interviewees were studying at local Chinese speaking schools and the remaining six interviewees were studying at international schools that use English as the medium

of instruction. Two interviewees were Caucasians and the remaining 14 were Chinese.

### *Data analysis*

All the responses generated from the first two questions were listed out and input into an excel file. The author sorted the answers into what girls or women should be if it is a description of a person and likewise sort the answers into what girls or women should do if it involves a specific action or behavior. Responses with almost the same meaning were grouped under the same item. Major themes were identified from the responses. Representative quotes and photos are presented.

### **Findings**

#### *What girls should or should not be*

Interviewees were asked what girls or women should be or should not be, with reference to the digital images that they had taken. Table 1 summarizes the results.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Altogether 61 responses were reported and were classified into five major themes.

The theme that received the largest number of responses was about personality, i.e. what kind of person the interviewee should be. Interviewees mentioned eleven different personality traits for girls and women. The personality traits that appeared the most frequently in the interviews were: be yourself, be brave, and be gentle. Six out of sixteen interviewees mentioned that girls should be themselves. Here is how

they think about “being yourself”.

They should be what they want to be. Like in the past, girls could not go to school, and they couldn't play sports. But now they can play sports and they can go to school. People think girls are dumb. If they could go to school, girls can show that they are smart. If you play sports, you can be strong. If boys bully you, you can beat them up (age 10, international school student).

This picture (see Figure 1) is taken from a cable TV program. She seems to be confident. It is about sometimes you have to be yourself and you don't need to pretend. If girls do not be themselves, they will look artificial. Sometimes they will twist their voices and pretend to be nice but this is not the way they usually talk. For example, when they are having a job interview, they pretend to be very, very nice so that people will hire her. Or when they are talking to the customers, they pretend to be very nice and try to please the customers (age 10, local school student).

In the first quote, being oneself means the right to choose her path. Education and fitness are the basis for girls to pursue their dreams. In the second quote, being oneself means not trying to pretend to be some body else in order to please others. Both quotes emphasize autonomy and independence.



Figure 1

Four interviewees reported that girls should be brave. An interviewee showed a picture of a female air traffic control officer from a newspaper and commented that she is brave. She also showed the picture of female actor and commented that she is brave.

The air traffic control officer is always a job for boys. She doesn't mind being teased by others and takes the job. She works day and night and is very hard working. I think girls can take up all kinds of job. There should be no problem if she can do it (age 10, local school student).

In this quote, the interviewee perceived that a girl should show no fear in facing difficulties and adversity, including criticism and mistreatment. Another interviewee commented that girls should not be fearful in any situation and should do what is right.

Three interviewees reported that girls should be gentle and not rude. An interviewee mentioned that girls should not use violence to solve problems. Other personality traits brought up by interviewees indicated that girls should be caring and full of love, out-going, and sensitive to feelings.

## Theme 2: Skills and vocation

The theme that received the second largest number of responses was about skills and vocation. This category covers what kind of job she should take and what kind of skill set she should have. Two interviewees mentioned that women should be knowledgeable and two mentioned that women should be hard working. One



interviewee said that a woman should be a good housekeeper as “boys have absolutely no talent in housekeeping”. Other skills mentioned include being creative, clever, and having good judgment. An interviewee commented that a knowledgeable person will get recognition in society.

### Theme 3: Appearance

The theme that received the third largest number of responses was about physical appearance. This category describes how girls and women should look. Interviewees thought that girls should be good-looking and presentable. They felt a girl should be neat and tidy, as well as not messy. From the adjectives they used, interviewees seem to emphasize the social aspects of physical appearance. They perceived that a girl or a woman’s appearance should be acceptable to others. A picture (Figure 2) was shown and the following comment was obtained,

Girls should not look horrible. Look at this picture. Her hair covers her eyes and her clothes are weird. She is really ugly (age 10, local school student).



Figure 2

An interview paid a great deal of attention to the details of appearance. Here are her comments.

Girls should have a presentable image. Their teeth should not be yellowish and should be white. The outlook should be tidy and not dirty. I think they should have vitality. Girls should not look sleepy. A sloppy outlook will have bad impression on others. The ladies in this picture (Figure 3) look graceful and poised, with proper and neat dresses (age 12, local school student).



Figure 3

Most of the pictures considered as good appearance by interviewees demonstrated a classical type of beauty. The models were usually in the age range of 20 to 25, feminine-looking, wore soft and feminine apparel, and with some make-up. The photos and the transcripts showed that interviewees were conservative. Trendy fashion models were often considered as deviant from the norm, and therefore inappropriate.

#### Theme 4: Healthy and natural

This theme describes the physical and mental well-being of girls and women.

Interviewees reported that girls and women should be healthy, strong, drug-free, engaging in exercise, and energetic. They should not have an eating disorder.

#### Theme 5: Manners and relationships

This theme describes what girls and women should be in the public sphere and when they interact with others. Interviewees reported that girls and women should be

courteous, refrained, conservative in sexual relationships, and not out-of-control in the worship of celebrities, music stars and film stars. Here are two quotes,

This is a picture of two characters in the novel “Pride and Prejudice”. They are shameless and they always do something annoying in the public. And they talk about everything without knowing right or wrong. Woman should not be like that (age 12, local school student).

There was news several months ago about a girl who worshiped an idol. She counted down the days of her idol showing up in a function. Before the function started, the girl fainted. I don’t remember if she fainted or died. I think idol worshiping is OK, as long as they don’t go crazy about it (age 12, local school student).

In the first quote, the interviewee suggested that girls and women should watch out for their manner in the public. In the second quote, the interviewee commented that girls should exercise self-control. In other transcripts not quoted, interviewees mentioned that girls should not be promiscuous and should not have too many sex partners.

#### *What girls should or should not do*

Interviewees were asked what girls or women should do or should not do, with reference to the digital images that they had captured. Table 2 summarizes the results.

Altogether 168 responses were collected and classified into six major themes. Just the sheer number of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors reported gives us the impression that interviewees have strong and vivid pictures about dos and don’ts of being a girl or a woman.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

### Theme 1: Appearance

The theme that received the largest number of responses was about appearance, i.e. what kind of clothes a girl should wear, whether a girl should use make-up, or how should a girl look. Interviewees demonstrated a strong rejection of sexy clothes, heavy make-up, and the alteration of body through cosmetic surgery. The definition of sexy clothing varied among interviewees. One considered clothing that exposed the belly and the shoulder sexy while another considered any clothes that were revealing in nature to be sexy (e.g. Figure 4). Regardless of their specific definition of the concept, interviewees indicated that wearing sexy clothes is indecent, weird, or dangerous.



Figure 4

The wearing of make-up was generally acceptable among the respondents. Heavy

make-up and cosmetic surgery were not acceptable because it makes a girl or woman look unnatural. They considered fashion trends such as dying hair, or wearing colorful fingernails exaggerations of particular features and therefore not acceptable. Drastic body movement was considered as rude and not gentle. This is an example,

This model is walking with the hip swinging from side to side. The movement is too drastic and is not natural (age 12, local school student).

Despite attempts by parents, government and society to restrict access to sexually explicit materials, these materials are present and available to the tween girls in Hong Kong. Images such as the picture in Figure 5 were collected by the interviewees from newspapers and magazines. All interviewees described them as disgusting or ugly.

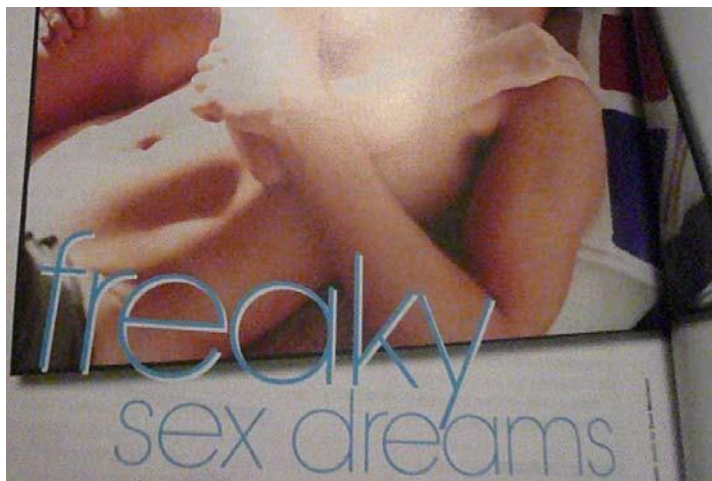


Figure 5

## Theme 2: Health and safety

The theme that received the second largest number of responses in terms of do's and don'ts was about health and safety issues. This category covers what kind of activities

may enhance or threaten the well-being of females. Nearly all interviewees mentioned that girls and women should not engage in unhealthy behaviors including smoking, drinking, and taking drugs. Nine interviewees mentioned that women should do exercise to keep them healthy. Four interviewees commented that females should not adopt dramatic measures in losing weight.

### Theme 3: Relationships

The theme receiving the third largest number of responses was about relationships.

This category describes how girls and women should interact with others. Family plays an important role among interviewees as seven of them mentioned that females should love their husbands and children. Interviewees were concern about protecting themselves from hurts in courtship or sexual relationships. Several reported that they should never let their boyfriends take nude pictures of them. Three interviewees disapproved of pre-marital sex or pre-marital pregnancy. Kissing another girl in public was considered disgusting because homosexuality was unacceptable.

### Theme 4: Caring for people and environment

A total of 23 responses brought up by interviewees were about caring. The theme describes the love and concern for others and the willingness to make an effort for social causes. Interviewees reported that girls and women should take care of their loved ones. In-marriage pregnancy was considered a demonstration of caring, while

pre-marital pregnancy creates too much uncertainty. One interviewee said,

If she's gonna give birth to kids, they should be ready. They should be older than 18. Otherwise, the kid may need to be sent to the foster home and you don't know what may happen to the kid (age 12, international school student).

One interviewee reported that females should help the needy such as those who have suffered from earthquakes. Four interviewees mentioned that girls and women should take a part in protecting the environment.

#### Theme 6: Work and others

The last theme groups together how girls and women should approach their studies and work. Interviewees reported that girls and women should make every possible effort in their school-work and excel in their occupation. Four interviewees commented that females should not spend lavishly while shopping and get stuck in credit-card debts.

### **Discussion**

In this qualitative study, researchers asked girls aged 10 to 12 in Hong Kong to take pictures from the media they consumed that told them what they should be or not be and what they should do or not do. These images illustrate the perception of gender roles and gender identities held by this group of tween girls. Based on the images captured and the discussion of the images captured, we have the following four observations.



First, Hong Kong tween girls' perceived gender roles and gender identities are based on a mixture of traditional and contemporary role models. On the one hand, they believe that girls and women should pursue their dreams, be themselves, and enjoy life. They are looking for egalitarianism, independence, and liberation. On the other hand, they believe that girls and women should have a presentable appearance, good manners, and be nice to others. All of which fall within a very traditional image of girls and women. It reflects both a western individualistic culture that assesses the identity of self and others based on personality traits as well as a collectivistic culture that assesses the ability of maintaining harmonious relationships with others (de Mooij, 2010). Tween girls in this study demonstrated an understanding of the social pressure exerted on females in society and the difficulties for females to excel. Good physical appearance was highly desirable and interviewees hold vivid and detailed definitions of it. Drastic body movement was considered rude and inappropriate along with dramatically colored hair, heavy makeup and intensely colored fingernail polish. In the western culture, the body is viewed as part of the identity and desirable appearance is related with greater self-esteem (De Mooij, 2010). In the current study, tween girls' perception of desirable appearance is related mainly with social acceptance. It again reflects the influence of collectivistic culture that one's identity is the group (De Mooij, 2010). The overwhelming acceptance of a classical definition of

beauty may be related to prevalence of such images in the print media. A content analysis of advertisements in a popular Hong Kong weekly magazine found that two thirds of the advertisements with female characters portrayed them in classic/feminine type of beauty (Chan and Cheng, 2010). The tendency to portray women in classic beauty types prevailed in Western and Asian cultures (Frith et al. 2005). The social learning process was demonstrated by interviewees in this study through modeling and identification. The interviewees paid much attention to media celebrities, and often made reference to them in defining physical beauty and moral codes. The finding is consistent with previous observation on adult men that celebrities provide a reference point through which personal identity can be understood (Horsley, 2006).

Second, tween girls in Hong Kong demonstrated conservative attitudes toward sexuality. They rejected sexy clothes, heavy make-up, and cosmetic surgery. In spite of the heavy bombardment of slimming advertisements in Hong Kong, tween girls rejected practices that claimed to reduce weight drastically. All these suggest that tween girls aspire to “natural” beauty.

Interviewees’ definition of sexiness showed a wide range of standards. Sexy clothes were rejected because of potential danger or indecency. Images suggesting homosexuality were scorned by interviewees. These findings are consistent with the

dominant discourses on parenting and education in Hong Kong that put emphasis on female chastity (Ho and Tsang, 2002). Adolescent sexual expression is constructed as ‘deviant’ and is usually associated with danger, moral problems, crime and psychological disorder (Ng, 1998; Wong, 2000). A few interviewees took photos of explicit sexual materials that they came across. Even though they condemned the images for indecency, the taking of these photos indicated that tween girls had interest and curiosity to know more about their own sexual identity and sexual life-world.

Several interviewees brought up that it was inappropriate for females to allow others to take nude pictures of them. This was probably triggered by a sex scandal involving Edison Chen, a popular Hong Kong singer, in 2008. Nude and more than suggestive photos of his sexual partners were released through the Internet. The female popular singers involved in the scandal suffered immediate damage to their careers as companies pulled out product endorsement and performance contracts. At the time of the data collection, the scandal was revitalized with the press reports of the court testimony and the public apology of a female singer involved. The scandal appeared to be a real-life social learning experience for the tweens. Several interviewees reported that females should not allow others to take nude pictures of them and another interviewee said you should never put 100 percent trust in your boyfriend.

Interviewees seem to perceive that females are vulnerable and suffer great loss in

reputation in a sex scandal.

Third, tween girls in Hong Kong showed concern about global as well as domestic social agendas. Traditional stereotypes portray females as dependent, submissive, and primarily interested in her home life (Rice and Dolgin, 2005). The interest in non-domestic issues should be good news to educators and parents as less rigid gender roles may encourage tween girls to gain freedom to pursue their interests.

Environmental awareness coupled with the awareness of undesirable consequences associated with taking drugs, drinking and driving, and smoking may point to the effectiveness of the Hong Kong government's public health and safety publicity channeled through the schools and the mass media. Previous study indicated that adolescents and young adults in Hong Kong place a great deal of trust in public services advertisements. The government was perceived as a credible source for health and safety related advices (Chan, 2010). The government should therefore use their apparent influence to design age-specific communication messages for the tween segment to advocate a position on important social causes and advance global improvement for humanity and the environment.

The fourth observation is related to media usage and information processing. Our study found that tween girls in Hong Kong consumed a variety of media, including cable TV, television, newspapers, magazines, books, subway posters, outdoor

billboards, video games and the Internet. Interviewees showed tremendous interest in adult-oriented contents across media. Lack of print media specifically for the teenagers and tweens may account for the heavy use of media for adults. An interviewee reported that girls should not be caught up in debt. She cited a Cable TV program about a female financial analysis helping a couple to face the family financial crisis. Some of them were also exposed to explicit sexual content and pornography. Parents and educators should be aware of the accessibility of these materials for tween girls and should take initiative to discuss with them the meaning of these images and contents.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the analysis of interviews and images found that tween girls' perceived gender roles for females were based on a mixture of traditional and contemporary role models. Interviewees were looking for liberation as well as presentable physical beauty in their consumption of media content. Tween girls in Hong Kong demonstrated conservatism in sexuality. Sexy appearance and pre-marital sexual relations were considered inappropriate. Tween girls showed concern about global as well as domestic social agendas. They used a variety of media and showed interest in content primarily created for adults.

As a qualitative study of a convenience sample, the current study does not allow for

the generalization of findings within and beyond Hong Kong. However, this research further establishes the need to examine media consumption as a multidimensional factor in the study of media effects and social learning. Further studies can be conducted with older girls as interviewees to map the changes in gender role perceptions with age. Studies can also be conducted among tween boys and among older boys on the perception of masculinity and media consumption. These studies will lay a solid foundation for focused quantitative research on the understanding of the role of media in the social and psychological development of the youth generation.

### **Marketing implications**

This study demonstrates the kinds of media images that attract the attention of female tweens in Hong Kong and what those images mean to them. As tween girls aspire to enjoy the freedom to be who they want to be, marketers should appeal to their motivation for independence and liberation. Yet, tween girls show rejection of sexualized images, heavy make-up and drastic means of alteration in body image.

Looking vital, energetic and natural is considered desirable. Skincare, beauty, and cosmetic marketers should therefore put emphasis on the benefit of the products in bringing out the true beauty and vivacity of the users. Media celebrities and models with classical beauty traits proved to be acceptable among tween girls in Hong Kong as product endorsers. These models should be dressed neatly, modestly and should

refrain from exaggerated facial expression or drastic body movements. Social marketers should continue to communicate to the tween segment about health and safety using age-appropriate messages as they are receptive to this content in the media environment. Tween girls use a variety of media in the same way as teenagers and adults, marketers and advertisers do not need to worry about locating tween-specific media channels for message dissemination. The tween can probably be welcomed as a spill-over audience for the current marketing communication campaigns remembering that the tween girl is attracted and repulsed in very specific ways as she seeks her identity in increasingly complex social environments.

Table 1 Summary of results for "What girls should be or should not be"?

Theme (total frequency)		Frequency
Appearance (12)	white teeth	2
	good appearance	2
	hair not messy	1
	hairs not too short	1
	neat and tidy	1
	not horrible in outlook	1
	not too skinny	1
	pleasing to the eyes	1
	poised and graceful	1
	presentable	1
	Healthy and natural (7)	have a healthy life/image
have vitality		2
Strong physically and mentally		2
not be in eating disorder		1
Manner and relationships (8)	courteous and make good impression	2
	not be a bitch	1
	not be shameless	1
	patient	1
	not promiscuous	1
	not out-of-sense in idol worship	1
	not too open-minded in sexual relationship	1
Personality (22)	be yourself, be what she want to be, not artificial	6
	brave	4
	gentle and not rude	3
	full of love	2
	able to make mistakes	1
	confident of yourself	1
	caring	1
	cheerful	1
	not shy and wimps	1
	positive	1
	sentimental	1
Skills and vocation (13)	knowledgeable	2
	hardworking	2



be a good housekeeper	1
be a nurse	1
creative	1
organized	1
responsible	1
clever and resourceful	1
have good judgment	1
have the right to go school	1
not be a prostitute	1
not superstitious	1

Table 2 Summary of results for "What girls should do or should not do"?

Theme (total frequency)		Frequency
Appearance (48)	not wear sexy clothes	6
	not wear heavy make-up	5
	not have cosmetic surgery	4
	wear smile	4
	not make too big body movement	3
	dress nicely and tidily	2
	not dye her hair	2
	not wear dark clothes	2
	have eye contact with others	1
	not keep too long nails	1
	know how to mix and match clothes	1
	not always wear make up	1
	not have messy hair	1
	not put on mud mask	1
	not to go to slimming center to change body shape	1
	not wear childish accessories	1
	not wear sexy cloths and perform hot dance in ads	1
	put on proper clothes	1
	not behave like a boy	1
	not have too short hair	1
	not paint the fingernails in different colors	1
	not perm their hairs and looks like boys	1
	not wear an eye-patch	1
	not wear too thin clothes during a cold day	1
stand straight and not hunchbacked	1	
not wear a hand tattoo	1	
wear makeup to look beautiful	1	
wear proper swimming suits	1	
Activities, interest, and lifestyle (24)		6
	enjoy life and have fun	
	read books	3
	express feelings	2
	having fun on special occasions	2
	take time to stop and look around	2
Travel	2	

	learn how to fight	1
	not fight for dump reasons	1
	not play mahjong	1
	not play rough sports such as ruby or boxing	1
	not use violence	1
	pursue their dreams	1
	write or sing songs	1
Care people and environment (23)		6
	take care of the husband and children	
	look after the environment	4
	help the needy	3
	take care of animals	2
	(for famous people) not do something that have negative impact to the society	1
	(for pregnant women) eat in such a way to keep the baby healthy	1
	help endangered animals from extinct	1
	help other people to relive their dreams	1
	make the world a better place	1
	not use violence	1
	spread the gospel	1
	take care of grandparents	1
Health and safety (33)	Not smoke/not drink/no drink and drive/not take drug	13
	stay healthy/do exercise	9
	eat property/not loss weight drastically/not take weight loss pills	4
	hurt herself or commit suicide	3
	drink sugary drink or too cold stuff	1
	not encounter with strangers	1
	not wander around	1
	promote health in the society	1
Relationships (28)	maintain good relationship with husband and family members	7
	not being taken in nude pictures	4
	develop and maintain friendship	2
	not have sexual relationship at a young age	2
	have a religion	1

	marry and have a family/children	1
	not "step on two boats with one foot"	1
	not adopt too many children (Madonna)	1
	not engage in gossip	1
	not engage in pre-marital sex	1
	not get pregnant before marriage	1
	not give away phone no. too casually	1
	not kiss another girl in the public	1
	not participate in compensated dating	1
	not put trust in the man you date 100 percent	1
	not take an indecent post in public	1
	take caution in making boyfriends	1
Work (6)	have achievement in work	2
	focus on school work	1
	not addict to computer	1
	not engage in corruption	1
	work as team to achieve a goal	1
Others (6)	not overspend and get into debts	4
	not break the rules	1
	not engage in indecent behaviors	1

Appendix. List of questions

1. From these pictures, what do you think about what girls or women should be or should not be?
2. From these pictures, what behavior(s) do you think are appropriate or inappropriate for girls or women?
- \*3. Who create these images and why do they create them in this way?
- \*4. Are you satisfied with the way the images of girls or women are created now?
- \*5. If you were a media owner and/or a media producer, what would you do in constructing images of young girls or women?

\* Answers to these questions are not included in this paper.

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