

## What do adolescent girls learn about gender roles from advertising images?

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## **What do adolescent girls learn about gender roles from advertising images?**

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## **What do adolescent girls learn about gender roles from advertising images?**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – A qualitative study by autovideography was conducted to examine adolescent girls' negotiation of their gender roles through the consumption of advertising images.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In total, 20 adolescent girls aged 15 to 18 in Hong Kong 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”. Advertising images captured by the interviewees and their interpretations of those images were analyzed.

**Findings** – Seven dominant themes were isolated from the interpretations: appearance, personality, skills and work, activities, interests and lifestyle, family, health and safety, and caring for people and the environment. The findings show that adolescent girls pay much attention to images about slimming, body image and physical appearance. They criticized female images in ads as unrealistic but identified with female images that were natural and conventional.

**Research limitations/implications** – The interviewees were recruited from two secondary schools that may not have been representative. The interviews were conducted in English, which may have caused some of the participants to be reticent about presenting their viewpoints. The implications represent a step forward in relation to how media influence young consumers and how teenagers perceive and intercept what they see in the media.

**Originality/value** – The paper shows that collecting and interpreting female visual images can illustrate vividly the process of gender socialization.

**Key words** consumer socialization, body image, qualitative method, social learning, advertising, adolescents, girls, China, individual behavior, sex and gender issues

## **What do adolescent girls learn about gender roles from advertising images?**

### **Introduction**

Adolescence is an important transitional stage when boys and girls learn gender role attitudes and behaviors (Erikson, 1968). Erikson has argued that it is crucial for adolescents to establish a traditional gender role—masculinity for adolescent boys and femininity for adolescent girls—because a gender role is one of the personal identities that adolescents must establish to avoid identity confusion and role diffusion problems (Erikson, 1963, 1968). Adolescents are socialized into socially acceptable gender roles through socializing agents such as parents, schools, peers and the mass media (Ruble and Martin, 1998). Indeed, the omnipresence of mass media is making them an important socializing agent for children as well as adolescents.

Girls in Hong Kong are often being bombarded with advertisements that tell them what they should be and what they should do (Chan et al., 2011). Previous research on gender issues in advertising has shown that advertisements in print and broadcast media portray females in accord with restrictive gender-based stereotypes such as portraying females as sex objects (Wolin, 2003). What do adolescent girls learn about gender roles from such advertisements? Do they pay much attention to them? Do they come to endorse the female images portrayed? This qualitative study asked adolescent girls to take photos of female images that illustrate appropriate or inappropriate gender roles from the media, and discuss what those images mean to them. The results help elucidate the process of gender socialization among adolescent girls.

## **Literature review**

Society nowadays is characterized by male centeredness and androcentrism, and is gender polarized (Bem, 1993). According to Bem, gender polarization means being a male or a female are considered mutually exclusive. Any behavior regarded by religion, society or culture as diverging from the mutually exclusive script is perceived as problematic. Individuals in gender-polarizing societies learn to reject behaviors that are inappropriate to their biological sex (Bem, 1993). In most western societies, males are supposed to be assertive, dominant, forceful, aggressive and independent, whereas females are supposed to be sympathetic, compassionate, affectionate, gentle, and tender (Bem, 1974).

Hong Kong is a Chinese society influenced by Confucian tradition. A survey has confirmed that Hong Kong respondents have strong gender stereotypes. Less than one-third of the Hong Kong respondents agree that women can realize their full potential (Women's Commission, 2003). Male centeredness and androcentrism in Chinese culture confer great status and privileges on males (Cheung, 1996). Females in Hong Kong were often being defined in terms of domestic functions and reproduction. There is room for improvement in gender equality at home as well as at the societal level (Women's Commission, 2010).

## **Portrayal of females in advertisements**

Advertising, as a form of persuasive communication, is a powerful socializing agent for gender roles and gender identities. Advertisements reflect a society's gender-related beliefs because advertisers must make various message strategy decisions in order to address targeted market segments (Luther, 2009). Previous content analysis has shown

that advertisements often portray both males and females using gender-based stereotypes. A synthesis of 76 gender-related advertising studies has shown that although gender-based stereotyping of females is decreasing, females are still mainly portrayed as sex objects in order to draw attention of males (Wolin, 2003). Furnham and Mak (1999) reviewed fourteen content analyses from eleven countries that examined gender role portrayals in television advertisements between 1975 and 1999. Most of the analyses revealed gender stereotypes, such as (1) where males were mostly presented as the authoritative central figures while females were mostly presented as product users; (2) males were shown as breadwinners, whereas females were shown as homemakers; or (3) males presenters were used to sell sports and hi-tech products, whereas females were used to sell home and body products (Furnham and Mak, 1999). Furnham and Paltzer (2010) later conducted an updated meta-analysis of thirty content analyses of television ads in twenty-four countries from 2000 to 2008. A majority of the analyses again showed that males played autonomous or professional roles while females played dependent customer roles (Furnham and Paltzer, 2010). Although more than half of the women in Hong Kong are in the workforce, less than five percent of females in magazine advertisements are shown in professional roles. More than fifty percent of the ads show females in what could be termed “decorative” roles (Chan and Cheng, 2012). Wu and Chung (2011) compared award-winning television commercials from China as well as Hong Kong and found that advertisements from Hong Kong were less likely to manifest modern representations of women than advertisements from Mainland China. Females in Hong Kong advertisements were more likely to be in family roles, as well as using indirect functions of speech (Wu and Chung, 2011).

During adolescence, males and females experience increased gender role differentiation due at least in part to changes in physical appearance (Hill and Lynch, 1983). At the time when adolescent girls are concerned about body image and appearance, advertisements exclusively provide images of skinny females with gorgeous hair, flawless skin and perfect figures (Labre and Walsh-Childers, 2003). A content analysis of U.S. magazine advertisements has confirmed that nearly half of the advertisements use classic, trendy or exotic types of feminine beauty (Englis et al., 1994). A content analysis of Hong Kong magazine advertisements similarly found that over sixty percent of the advertisements employed classic feminine beauty, followed by casual and sex kitten beauty types (Chan and Cheng, 2012).

Body image is an important factor in adolescent girls' self-evaluations (Thompson et al., 1999). Numerous studies have shown that media images of skinny female models negatively influence females' perceptions of their bodies and their eating behavior (e.g., Clay et al., 2005; Harrison et al., 2006; Sabiston and Chandler, 2009; Stice and Shaw, 1994). An experimental study has shown that females perceive a greater difference between their ideal body size and their actual body size after watching sexist advertisements (Lavine et al., 1999). Exposing women to typical advertising images has been shown to encourage thinness and dieting (Fay and Price, 1994). Females in Hong Kong who are interested in dieting and fitness topics on television and in magazines are also more likely to show eating disorder symptoms (Prendergast et al., 2002). Those findings indicated that adolescent girls exposed constantly to ideal female body images in the media are encouraged to emphasize physical beauty.

## **Learning gender roles from advertising images**

Qualitative studies have examined what types of media images attract the attention of pre-adolescent girls in Hong Kong and how they perceived the images presented (Chan, 2011a; Chan, 2011b; Chan et al., 2011). Pre-adolescent girls' perceived gender roles were shown to combine traditional and contemporary female role stereotypes. Hong Kong girls feel females should have good manners, be presentable in appearance and at the same time should pursue their dreams and enjoy life. They show conservative attitudes toward sex and reject heavy make-up, sexy clothes and plastic surgery (Chan et al., 2011). Pre-adolescent girls say they are unsatisfied with female images in the media. They find them unrealistic and too ideal. If they were the media producers, they say they would like to create female images that are more active, natural and healthy (Chan, 2011a). Pre-adolescent girls learn gender roles in part from celebrities portraying females as brave, courteous, self-confident, expressive of their feelings, well educated and achieving career goals. They profess to reject female role models who appear promiscuous, superstitious, to consume drugs or alcohol, or to have had cosmetic surgery (Chan, 2011b).

## **Research objective**

Adolescents' processing of gender images in the media is an under-studied topic in the research on youth and the media. How do adolescent girls select, assimilate, and evaluate advertising images of females in today's gender-polarized societies? What types of female media images in advertisements attract their attention? How do they interpret these images? This study was designed to examine adolescent girls' perceptions of gender roles in advertising images.



## **Methods**

### *Sample*

Videographic data (Belk and Kozinets, 2005) were collected by asking participants to record images from the media that they encountered in their every-day experience. A visual method was considered relevant and feasible because taking and sharing pictures has become an important part of the typical adolescent's lifestyle.

The participants were 20 adolescent girls aged 15 to 18 studying in Hong Kong. All were recruited through personal networks. Ten of the interviewees were studying at a local Chinese medium school and ten were studying at an international school that uses English as the medium of instruction. Sixteen interviewees were Chinese and four were Caucasians.

### *Procedures*

The procedure was adopted from a previous study on processing of media images in Hong Kong by pre-adolescent girls (Chan et al., 2011). The participants were interviewed in June to December 2010 in Hong Kong. Before a face-to-face interview, each interviewee was instructed follows:

“Please take 7 to 10 digital photographs each day for a week from any medium that are about what girls or women should be or should not be, or what girls or women should do or should not do. The images can come from all sorts of media, including newspapers, magazines, outdoor posters, television programs, Mass Transit Railway posters, web sites, books and so on. The media should be the one you are exposed to or sometimes use in your daily life. The media can be aimed at people like you or aimed at people who are different from you.”

After a week of collecting images, an individual face-to-face interview was conducted in English by a researcher (one of the authors together with a female graduate research

assistant who was fluent in both English and Chinese). The respondents reviewed the photos they had taken and interpreted the images one by one. The interviews took place at their schools. The duration of the interviews ranged from 10 to 50 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded. Informed consents from interviewees' parents were received before the interviews.

### *Data analysis*

Only photos from advertisements were analyzed. As advertisements reflect today's gender polarized societies, the current study focuses on how adolescent girls learn about gender roles from advertising images. Photos from other media would be analyzed in another paper. The respondents' interpretations were categorized and sorted into an Excel file. An answer was sorted into the "what girls or women should be" category if it described a person and into the "what girls or women should do" category if it specified a behavior. Photos from advertisements were identified by two coders from a pool of photos. The advertisements were selected by them with consensus as a goal. One photo was excluded due to disagreement between the two coders. The comparison analysis method was used throughout the process of data analysis (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Responses from the photos and the interviews were compared and contrasted across the sample constantly and systematically (Strauss, 1987). Major themes were identified from the responses. Responses with similar meaning were categorized as having the same theme. The theme classifications were identified, discussed, and agreed by all of the authors. Representative photos and quotes were selected. Because of the small sample size and the exploratory nature of the study, we do not compare the findings between local and international school students, junior and senior students, or between Chinese

and non-Chinese interviewees. Further studies can explore such differences by using a larger sample size.

## **Findings**

All together the participants took 883 photos, of which 132 were from advertisements. The other photos were mainly from newspapers, magazines, and the internet. Most of the ads were about beauty products and services, including 22 percent from cosmetics, skin care, or personal care advertisements and 14 percent from ads for beauty and slimming treatments. Another 37 percent were from clothing and accessories advertisements, while 21 percent were from ads for retail shops such as shops selling DVD. The remaining advertisements were about food and medicine, furniture, home appliances, electronics, and public service announcements. The pool of advertisements portrayed 90 Caucasian models, 35 Asian models, one Black model and two cartoon characters.

Analysis of the interviews generated seven dominant themes about learning gender roles from advertising images. The themes were (1) Appearance, (2) Personality, (3) Skills and work, (4) Activities, interests and lifestyle, (5) Family, (6) Health and safety, and (7) Care for people and the environment.

### *Theme 1: Appearance.*

The theme that received the largest number of responses was about physical appearance. Interviewees mentioned how girls or women should look 94 times. Five interviewees declared a total of 22 times that girls or women should not be skinny. The advertising images the interviewees collected were mainly of extremely thin models in

clothing and accessories advertisements as well as in beauty and slimming advertisements.

The respondents often commented that these girls or women were ridiculous, weird, unnatural or unrealistic. One interviewee showed a print ad for a beauty and slimming treatment (Figure 1) and said,

“I think they are advertising either some pills or diet program. I think she looked fine before using the product. She now looks nearly anorexic.” (age 15, an international school student)



Figure 1. A print ad for a beauty and slimming treatment.

Another student showed a print ad for shoes (Figure 2) and noticed that the model's legs were abnormal. Here is her quote:

“Her legs are way too thin. She is just completely fake. I've never seen anyone with legs that thin. If I saw someone with legs that thin, I would think she needs to eat a meal and get some help because that's not normal.” (age 17, an international school student)



Figure 2. A print ad for shoes.

Another interviewee showed photo of a TV ad for a non-government organization in Sweden that provides treatment for eating disorders (Figure 3). She made the following comment.

“In the mirror she looks at herself as fat, but in reality she is actually quite thin. To me, that’s pretty scary that girls think themselves into this type of thing. To be honest you should never ever starve your body and make it suffer just to make you think that if you lost this much weight then you’ll be accepted into society.” (age 15, an international school student)



Figure 3. A TV ad for treatment of eating disorder.

Two interviewees mentioned 21 times that girls or women should look natural. These adolescent girls considered as natural females who wear light makeup and normal outfits. They felt women should not wear heavy makeup or “slutty” clothing. Neither should they be skinny or look strange. An interviewee showed a print ad and said the Caucasian model was not wearing too much lipstick, so she looks normal. The same respondent showed another print ad for clothing (Figure 4) to illustrate how a natural looking girl should be.

“She looks dorky, but that’s cute. You don’t have to be blond and wear slutty clothing. I don’t think they even look that attractive to be honest. Their faces look strange. They don’t look like they are actually real. They just look like they have been made like that.” (age 17, an international school student)



Figure 4. An example of natural looking girl.

Seven interviewees reported 10 times that girls or women should not have cosmetic surgery. One participant thought females look very odd after having cosmetic surgery. It was considered bad for women to change their face or body shape through surgery because “when you change your body shape, it is not natural anymore.” Here is a typical quote:

“To me plastic surgery is not good. I don’t like plastic surgery. I don’t think you should change the way you look and I can’t get over the fact that you are putting plastic in your body.” (age 15, an international school student)

Another respondent showed an outdoor ad for beauty and slimming surgery (Figure 5) and gave the following comment.

“This artist had Botox. She gets a thinner face and becomes skinny. I don’t think it is a good way to get thin. If you want to be healthy and beautiful, you should do exercise rather than having this.” (age 17, a local school student)



Figure 5. An outdoor ad for beauty and slimming surgery.

Four adolescent girls mentioned that girls or women should not wear makeup or heavy makeup. Here is an illustrative quote:

“A lot of my friends wear makeup and personally I don’t wear makeup. It’s probably because of my mom. When I was young, she never let me wear makeup. ‘You are going to get old and you are going to get wrinkles soon.’ That was her theory. But for me now when I look back at it, I am glad she did it because now my friends don’t want to leave their house without their makeup. They feel like it’s a necessity now. They have to have it even if it’s just a little bit.” (age 15, an international school student)

However, two interviewees reported that girls or women should wear light makeup. A participant showed a print ad and said she would wear makeup if it is not too “over the top”. One interviewee mentioned that girls or women should not have flawless skin. She perceived females with flawless skin as weird and looking like mannequins. Another respondent mentioned that girls should not dress older than their age. She showed a print ad for clothing (Figure 6) and said,

“It makes girls look older than they should. I know its part of teen culture but I think it puts those adult elements in a bit too early. I can see the ages of the girls. I would think that they are fifteen years old and I think that’s not how you should look because you are only 15. You shouldn’t be dressed in that way.” (age 16, an international school



student)



Figure 6. A print ad for clothing.

Other participants thought females should wear nice, normal, and beautiful clothes with light perfume. Girls or women should not look weird and unnatural.

### *Theme 2: Personality.*

Interviewees mentioned 9 times what kind of girl or woman they aspired to be. Most interviewees perceived that females should be gentle, kind and well mannered. They should not be materialistic or rude. A respondent mentioned what she termed 'princess sickness'. Here is her quote:

“We sometimes think that [the] princess is the ideal role model for Hong Kong girls now. We have a buzzword that Chinese girls always have the princess sickness. Girls [are] growing up with 100% attention from their parents. They have everything they want. They always want brand-name things. I think it is a negative statement.” (age 17, a local school student)

### *Theme 3: Skills and work.*

Respondents reported 7 times about what kind of skills girls or women should have and how girls or women should pursue their studies and work. One interviewee said girls should study more. Two thought women should not focus on their family and stay at home. They should go out and work. One interviewee displayed a political party campaign poster with the slogan “Women like men, only cheaper: If you don’t like it, help us right now” and said we should not treat females as inferior. Here is an illustrative quote:

“If you look at it negatively, it’s really insulting. But it’s true. Women treat them lower than men sometimes and that’s not the right thing to do.” (age 15, an international school student)

An interviewee showed a watch ad (Figure 7) and said she considered the celebrity endorser to be successful. Here is her comment:

“I think she portrays what the society thinks a successful lady or woman should be. She is elegant and mature. I hope I could be like her.” (age 18, an international school student)



Figure 7. Image of a successful woman.

*Theme 4: Activities, interests and lifestyle.*

Participants mentioned 6 times various activities, interests and lifestyles they felt girls or women should pursue. They reported that girls or women should patronize spas to relax and release pressure, or go to the beach with others to have fun and enjoy life. One girl showed two website ads for movie DVDs and said girls or women should pursue her dreams. Here are two typical quotes.

“This woman could drive a plane. I think she’s very tough and very strong. She fulfilled her dream about flying.”

“She loves to cook and she cooks a lot. Although everyone thinks she’s not good, she still persisted on her dream, so I think we should seek after our dream, too.” (both from the same local school student, age 17)

*Theme 5: Family.*

Interviewees mentioned marriage, pregnancy or being a mother 6 times. Most thought women should have a family and children. A local school student mentioned specifically that girls should not get pregnant before marriage.

*Theme 6: Health and safety.*

The adolescent girls mentioned 6 times various activities that they view as enhancing the well-being of females. One interviewee showed three images and mentioned throughout the interview three times that girls or women should have cervical cancer tests. She thought it is important for a woman to have body checks regularly. Interviewees said girls or women should eat healthily and exercise. Here is a typical quote:

“Doing some exercise can make us healthy. She has a good character if she plays sports. Playing sports can reduce pressure, too.” (age 17, a local school student)

*Theme 7: Caring for people and the environment.*

A total of 4 responses were about how girls or women should love and care about others and the environment. One interviewee considered that girls or women should care

about the environment because everyone wants to enjoy nice scenery. She considered it a good idea to save the world. The other interviewee who commented on this theme said girls or women should “have a good heart” towards other people.

## **Discussion**

Before discussing the findings, it should be emphasized that these respondents were chosen from two secondary schools which may not have been representative of all schools in Hong Kong, much less elsewhere. This, of course, limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the interviews were conducted in English. This may have led some of the participants to be more reticent in presenting their viewpoints. Future research might overcome both of these problems by using more representative samples, and by conducting the interviews in the interviewees’ native language.

That said, the findings demonstrate that schoolgirls pay attention to advertisements advocating a slim body, flawless skin and a perfect face. Adolescent girls take a critical viewpoint in attending to such images. Many commented that the skinny and perfect female images in advertisements are unnatural, unrealistic and even ridiculous. They professed to reject the idea that such images represent what girls or women should be or should do. They also scorned female images with heavy make-up, or models that seem to have undergone cosmetic surgery, as well as those they described as too sexy. Although the adolescent girls in the present study professed to reject the portrayal of skinny females in advertisements, the high proportion of advertisements with skinny females captured by the interviewees demonstrated that these images were influential and powerful. Obviously, it is quite a challenge finding advertisements with females who are

not Photoshop-edited. Instead, they showed admiration for females in advertisements that were natural and wearing clothes appropriate for their age and lifestyle, though they considered light make-up acceptable.

The interviews demonstrated that these girls were fully aware of the advertisers' intention to encourage girls to emphasize appearance in defining themselves. Interviewees often reported the importance of body image, skin, clothing, and make-up in females' self-evaluations. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies that body image is an important factor in adolescent girls' evaluations of themselves and others (Thompson et al., 1999). It is inconsistent, however, with the findings of previous studies that exposure of females in advertising image is associated with negative self-evaluations of body image (e.g. Irving, 1990; Stive & Shaw, 1994). Further study is needed to explore if this represents a consistent difference between Chinese and western women in the emphasis they put on beauty in defining self-identity.

Some participants used beauty and slimming ads to illustrate what they perceived as inappropriate or undesirable gender roles. The critical reading and dissatisfaction with female images that are too thin or too near perfection are similar to the findings previously reported among pre-adolescents girls in Hong Kong (Chan, 2011a). Similar to what was reported in Chan's 2011 study, the adolescent girls in this study showed approval of female images in advertisements that they considered natural looking and as wearing clothes that were not too sexy, even though the approved images displayed light make-up.

Close to seventy percent of the female images chosen were of Caucasians and only one quarter were Asian. This can be accounted for by the fact that adolescent girls in Hong

Kong are active users of both local and global media. In addition, a recent content analysis of Hong Kong magazine ads has shown that most beauty product ads employ Caucasian models (Chan and Cheng, 2012).

The personality traits perceived as appropriate for females were gentle, kind and well-mannered. None of the masculine personality traits such as ambitious were mentioned. This indicates that gender stereotyping prevailed among the sample. This is consistent with a survey finding that Hong Kong adolescents were gender stereotyped. Adolescent girls have been found to perceive feminine personality traits such as being sympathetic and shy as more feminine than adolescent boys do (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000). The respondents similarly endorsed traditional gender roles in the family arena. They expressed an aspiration to be wives and mothers. They also accepted the domestic responsibility of taking care of children in the family.

Very few participants reported strong career and achievement aspirations based on the female images in advertisements. Only a few participants took female advertising images in professional roles and expressed their wish to have a successful career and be able to pursue their dreams. This is probably because of a lack of females portrayed in professional roles in Hong Kong's advertising (Chan and Cheng, 2012). The result echoes that of a survey of female secondary school students in which few respondents aspired to be their family's main breadwinner. They wanted to have a job, but at the same time they wanted themselves and their children to be provided for (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000).

The good news for public health and environmental advertisers is that some of the participants reported concern about health and the environment. Several participants

reported that females should take action to prevent female-specific illnesses. This indicates that some of Hong Kong's public health messages have successfully registered with the target segment.

## **Conclusions**

Advertisements provide abundant female images from which adolescents learn about appropriate and acceptable gender roles and identities. The findings indicate that schoolgirls infer both desirable and undesirable gender roles from female images in advertisements. They criticized the overuse of thin females and images with perfect faces and bodies. The extent to which these 'perfect' images were scrutinized suggests these images were powerful and fascinating to the adolescent girls. They aspired to resemble female images in advertisements which they considered natural and conventional. They endorsed traditional female images of gentleness, and being domestic and caring. Campaigns about female health were able to trigger their concern. This study is of significant interest for practitioners and researchers. It shows how advertising images influence young consumers and how teenagers interpret these images.

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