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Interpretation of female images in advertising among Chinese adolescents

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Interpretation of female images in advertising among Chinese adolescents

Abstract

Purpose — Based on Tobin et al.'s (2010) gender self-socialization model (GSSM), a focus group study was conducted to examine how Chinese adolescent girls and boys interpret female images in gendered advertisements.

Design/methodology/approach — Forty-eight Hong Kong adolescents studying in high schools or university year one participated in a focus group study. Four advertisements with different types of female images were presented. Interviewees were asked to discuss the appearance, the personality, and the work and family life of the female characters in the advertisements. Interviewers then asked them to select the one most closely representing their ideal female image.

Findings — Most of the interviewees chose an urban sophisticate as the character closest to their ideal female image. Female interviewees identified with the urban sophisticate and aspired to the cultured nurturer image. However, they rejected the strong woman and the "flower vase" female images.

Research limitations — The generalizability of the findings was limited because of the small sample size and non-probability sampling.

Marketing implication — When targeting adolescents, advertisers should consider using female images displaying a personality that is neither too strong nor too weak.

Originality/value — This is the first study to investigate how Hong Kong adolescents interpret female images from gendered advertisements. This study also clarifies the gender concepts to explain how adolescents perceive gendered ads.

Keywords Gender roles, Advertising effect, Qualitative study, Consumer perception

Paper type Research paper

Interpretation of female images in advertising among Chinese adolescents

Introduction

Self-socialization theory (Arnett, 1995; Tobin et al., 2010) is viewed as a conceptual framework for explaining children's and adolescents' information processing related to gender. According to Arnett's (1995) self-socialization theory, adolescents not only model and adopt the behaviors of ideal role models in media (particularly in advertising), but also search for information as an active user to change and monitor their behavior. They develop their own ideal perceptions of gender roles by searching for and admiring media models. Thus, the media plays a strong and potent role in the gender socialization of adolescents (Arnett, 1995; Brown, 2000). How do children and adolescents perceive gender? The three key concepts in gender theories and research are gender identity (e.g., I am a girl), gender stereotypes (e.g., girls in the media are skinny), and self-perception of gender-type attributes (e.g., I should be skinny). Tobin et al. (2010) developed a gender self-socialization model (GSSM) to integrate and assimilate the three gender concepts into a coherent conceptual model.

The purpose of the current study is to conceptualize how adolescents project their ideal female images in response to advertisements with regard to Tobin et al.'s (2010) gender self-socialization model. There is a tremendous amount of gender-related messages in the media (Chan, 2014). Using an auto-videography approach by asking adolescents to record images from the media that they encountered in their everyday experience, previous research on gender found four dominant themes for gender roles and identities: appearance, personality, work, and family (Chan et al., 2011; Chan et al., 2012a; Chan and Ng, 2013a). Using the GSSM as a theoretical framework, the present study attempts to investigate how adolescents respond to the four gender themes.

Literature review

Gender socialization focuses on the periods of childhood and adolescence.
Adolescence is a transitional stage of self-discovery between childhood and adulthood
(Erikson, 1968; Rice and Dolgin, 2005), a period when children and adolescents
develop and consolidate different gender cognitions. The combinations of gender
identity, gender stereotypes, and attribute self-perception can influence adolescents'
perception of gender (Tobin et al., 2010).

Gender identity is defined as the connections children and adolescents form
between self and a gender category. An adolescent understands that he or she belongs
to one sex rather than the other (Kohlberg, 1966). It is the internalized societal
pressure of gender conformity that causes an adolescent to form his or her beliefs or
behaviors to fit in with or be accepted by religion, society, or culture (Bem, 1981). For
example, pre-adolescent girls reported that girls should not behave like boys (Chan et
al., 2011). They categorized themselves as the girl group and rejected having
characteristics of the boy group.

Gender stereotypes are children's and adolescents' beliefs about differing attributes
between males and females. To be specific, it concerns how females believe that they
are or they should be different from males (Huston, 1983). Chan et al. (2011) found
that pre-adolescent girls combined traditional and contemporary female role
stereotypes in their perception that girls should be presentable and have good manners.
Adolescent girls agreed that the maxim "Men are breadwinners; women are
homemakers" is appropriate (Chan and Ng, 2012; 2013b).

Attribute self-perceptions are self-perceptions of attributes that classify males and
females. Attributes such as interest (e.g. girls should have fun and enjoy life; Chan et

al., 2012a), self-efficacy (e.g. girls can pursue studies and work; Chan and Ng, 2013a), intentions (I want to pursue my dream; Chan, 2014), and future selves (I want to be a successful lady in future; Chan et al., 2012a) can characterize the self (Tobin et al., 2010). When pre-adolescent and adolescent girls were asked about their gender perceptions, attributes given included skills and work as well as activities, interests, and lifestyle (Chan et al., 2011; Chan et al., 2012a; Chan and Ng, 2013a).

The GSSM integrates and assimilates the three gender concepts and hypothesizes that each gender concept is a product of a cognitive interaction between the other two gender concepts (Tobin et al., 2010). The *stereotype emulation hypothesis* states that the more a child or an adolescent identifies with a gender stereotype, the more he or she aspires to take on the attributes typical of that stereotype. This represents the interactive influences of gender identity and gender stereotype on attribute self-perception (e.g., I am a girl and girls are gentle, so I should be gentle). For example, an adolescent girl in Chan et al.'s (2012a) study considered a celebrity endorser in an advertisement to be successful, so she hoped she could be like the endorser.

The *stereotype construction hypothesis* is that the more a child or an adolescent identifies with a set of attributes of a particular gender, the more he or she projects the attributes onto the gender stereotype (Tobin et al., 2010). It represents the interactions of gender identity and attributes self-perception on gender stereotype (e.g., I am a girl and I am gentle, so girls are gentle). In Chan et al.'s (2012b) study, some adolescent girls did not approve of sexy clothes, so they commented that other girls should not dress sexily as it is offensive and ridiculous.

The *identity construction hypothesis* states that the more a child's or an adolescent's self-perceived attributes fit the gender stereotypes, the more he or she forms that

gender identity (Tobin et al., 2010). It interacts with attributes of self-perception and gender stereotypes on gender identity (e.g., I am gentle and girls are gentle, so I am a girl). When girls who perceive themselves as brave were asked to select images in the media, they preferred media celebrities who dare to express themselves (Chan et al., 2011).

Adolescent responses to gendered advertisements

The present study adopted Hirschman and Thompson's (1997) interpretive strategies to investigate how adolescents respond to media images. Three interpretive strategies were classified to explain consumer-media relationships. The three strategies were *inspiring and aspiring* (i.e. media users aspire to media images which are perceived as ideal self-images or ideal self-concepts), *deconstructing and rejecting* (i.e. media users separate the undesired media images and self-images or self-concepts), and *identifying and individualizing* (i.e. media users connect self-images or self-concepts to ideal media images). Hung et al. (2007) attempted to measure female audiences' responses to advertisements using different female images. It was found that female media-users rejected the strong woman while aspiring to the woman concerned with luxury leisure and adornments. They identified with the woman concerned with physical appearance and rejected the woman reliant on a man (Hung et al., 2007). Another previous study showed that adolescents aspired to be like the elegant woman, rejected the strong woman, and identified with the urban sophisticated female (Ng and Chan, 2014). Hirschman and Thompson's (1997) interpretive strategies were used because the current study aims to understand the perceived meanings adolescent consumers derive from advertisements.

Content analyses have classified types of female images in advertisements (e.g.

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Chan and Cheng, 2012; Hung et al., 2007). The current study adopts Hung et al.'s (2007) classification of female images. The four types of female in ads in Hung et al.'s (2007) study are *urban sophisticate* (i.e. females shown as distinct, unique, and engaged in leisure activities)*, strong woman* (i.e. females shown as talented, confident, and independent), "*flower vase*" (i.e. females shown as concerned with physical beauty), and *cultured nurturer* (i.e. females shown as taking care of husband or children). Urban sophisticate females appeared most frequently in Chinese magazine advertising (40 percent), followed by flower vase-type females (30 percent), and strong women and cultured nurturers appeared least frequently (Hung et al., 2007).

The current study

Ng and Chan (2014) conducted a qualitative study to examine how mainland Chinese adolescents form an ideal self-image by responding to gendered ads. The current study is inspired by Ng and Chan's (2014) study. It differs from Ng and Chan's (2014) study in three aspects. First, interviewees in Ng and Chan's (2014) study were mainland Chinese adolescents while interviewees in this study were Hong Kong Chinese adolescents. Psychographic studies found that Hong Kong adolescent girls were more likely to be traditional, while mainland girls were more likely to be aggressive (Chan and Ng, 2015). We want to examine if the difference in psychographics may have an impact on the girls' interpretations of female images.

    Second, Ng and Chan (2014) used individual in-depth interviews to uncover responses to gendered ads. This study adopts focus groups to investigate the topics. Focus groups have the advantages of generating a wider range of information, creating a chain of ideas through interaction, bringing out participants' views by the group process, and having less individual pressure (but maybe more social pressure)

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than in-depth interviews (Zikmund, 1997).

Third, three types of female images in ads (i.e. elegant, strong, and cute) were selected in Ng and Chan's (2014) study. In the current study, we selected four types of female images, including "flower vase" (appearance), urban sophisticate (personality and leisure), strong woman (work), and cultured nurturer (family) that were close to the four gender themes, i.e. appearance, personality, work, and family (Chan et al., 2011; Chan et al., 2012a; Chan and Ng, 2013a).

How children and adolescents process gendered information in the media is an area of terminological confusion. Tobin et al.'s (2010) GSSM of gender concept attempts to integrate main gender theories into a single theoretical framework and provides a clear explanation of gender. The clarity of gender concepts can serve as a heuristic blueprint for marketers and advertisers to generate marketing insights for targeting adolescents.

Qualitative method is desirable for the present study because it treats participants as reflexive, meaning-making, and intentional actors but not as subjects (Marecek, 2003). Adolescents are perceived as active participants to interpret the female images in advertisements. The GSSM proposed three hypotheses to specify how the three constructs of gender identity, gender stereotypes, and attribute self-perceptions interact. So far we have not yet found any quantitative study on empirical testing of the three hypotheses. We do not intend to test GSSM hypotheses in the present study. Instead, we examine if the audience adopts this framework in their interpretation of ideal female images. We hope that the current study will provide practical contributions for marketers and advertisers by clarifying gender concepts that previous studies did not.

Research questions

This study posed the same research questions as in Ng and Chan's (2014) study: how do Chinese adolescent girls and boys perceive (1) the appearance of females; (2) the personality of females; (3) the work and family of females; and (4) to what extent do Chinese adolescent girls and boys aspire to, reject, or identity with the females depicted in images in gendered advertisements?

Method

Interviewees

Forty-eight interviewees (24 males; 24 females) participated in the present study. The interviewees were divided into eight focus groups (six interviewees each) using quota sampling based on school grade and sex. We grouped the interviewees of the same sex and grade together to encourage free expression of perceptions. They were studying in forms 3 to 6 or university year one (equivalent to the American grades 9 to 12 and college year one) in Hong Kong secondary schools or universities.

Procedures

Students of a university in Hong Kong taking a course on consumer behavior were asked to recruit interviewees from their social networks to participate in the study. They were instructed to conduct a focus group using a list of questions (see Appendix) and audio record the interview. One of the authors trained them in moderating techniques and two moderators administered each interview. The two moderators showed four selected ads on an electronic device to the interviewees. After that, interview transcripts were prepared. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous and informed consent was obtained. The interviews were conducted in

Cantonese in January and February 2014.

Stimulus

Following Hung et al.'s (2007) classification of female images, one of the authors selected four television commercials on Youtube to represent four types of female images, including an urban sophisticate, a strong woman, a "flower vase", and a cultured nurturer. The first, one-minute, television commercial was for Canon (Aacafe, 2009). It features an Asian girl as a tourist in a city in Europe. She asks local people to take photos for her in their language (i.e. urban sophisticate). The second, 3-minute and 30-second (we cut this ad to 30 seconds by removing scenes containing nudity or sexual connotation), television commercial was for Chanel (Chanel, 2011). The commercial features a Caucasian female model who is independent and focuses on her career. She outpaces all the men in a motor-cycle race (i.e. strong woman). The third, 15-second, commercial was for Kellogg's (TPB HK TVC, 2013). It features a young Asian woman exhibiting her slim body to female peers (i.e. "flower vase"). The final, 15-second, commercial was for Kinder Joy (TPB HK TVC, 2012). It features a mother taking care of her children (i.e. cultured nurturer).

Data analysis

Two trained coders read the transcripts a few times to familiarize themselves with the data. Altogether 110 transcribed pages were analyzed in total. The two coders used the constant comparative method to analyze and generate meaningful categories in order to explore and investigate the phenomenon systematically (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). Questions 1 to 4 were analyzed in the present study. The coders created summary notes and recorded interpretations of the data and reflections on the

data. Based on the process of data analysis, the coders constructed, discussed, and refined the notes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Based on the answers to the research questions, topic codes were created. The coders stopped the coding when new codes stopped appearing (Charmaz, 2006).

By adopting Hirschman and Thompson's (1997) interpretive strategies in data analysis, interviewees who aspire to the media images (i.e. perceive the ad images as ideal self-images) were interpreted as *inspiring and aspiring*; interviewees who reported that they found the media images undesirable (i.e. perceive the ad images as undesired self-images) were interpreted as *deconstructing and rejecting*; and respondents who connect self-images to ideal media images were interpreted as *identifying and individualizing*.

The final codes were discussed and agreed by the two coders. The authors selected representative quotes and translated them into English. Less emphasis was put on analysis by sex or by education because of the small sample size. Statistical analysis was not conducted.

Results

Research question 1: Appearance

Interviewees said that the urban sophisticate in the first ad looks agreeable and cute. She looks young and active in her casual clothing and light make-up. Here are two illustrative quotes:

"She is a young girl dressing her age. Her hairstyle and her casual dress-up make me feel comfortable." (Female, form 5.)

"Her dressing is not fashionable. She is an adolescent dressing her age, so she dresses commonly and casually." (Female, form 5.)

The strong woman in the second ad was perceived to be cool and elegant, as well as

having the right body for a model. Interviewees commented that she wears heavy makeup and fashionable clothing. One interviewee said she looks a bit masculine.

Interviewees highlighted the fact that the "flower vase" in the third ad is tall and thin. Two male interviewees stated that she looks sweet. A female interviewee remarked that she wanted to draw others' attention. Another female interviewee said, "She is thin. And many girls may want to look like her." (Female, form 3.)

The cultured nurturer in the fourth ad has a motherly image. Six interviewees perceived that she is old but three thought she is young. An interviewee stated that she looks well mannered:

"She wears warm colored clothing. It shows her gentle image." (Female, form 5.)

Another one mentioned:

"She ties her hair in a bun, maybe because she needs to do housework. A bun can make housework easier. She has a simple outfit. It may facilitate doing housework and taking care of children. So she cannot wear beautiful clothing. She loves her children very much. Looks like a typical full-time housewife". (Male, form 3.).

Research question 2: Personality

Interviewees perceived that the urban sophisticate in the first ad is outgoing, active, and kind. She is enthusiastic and curious to learn new things. Here is a representative quote:

"I think she is a warm-hearted and active girl. If she faces any difficulties, she will solve the problem actively, such as asking people to take a photo for her. And she is a cheerful person, because she always smiles. She smiles when she talks to people." (Female, form 3.)

Six of them thought she was independent as she travels alone. Six interviewees commented that she is polite and kind. An interviewee put it this way:

"She is kind toward others. She bothers to learn the local language." (Male, form 3.)

Interviewees commented that the strong woman in the second ad is wild and

confident. She has a unique personality. She persists in doing whatever she wants and

doesn't care about what others think. Interviewees also remarked that she is strong

and independent. In their words:

"She is an independent woman who doesn't need to depend on men. And she has
confidence. She has a cool smile." (Female, form 4.)

"I think she should be a confident person. When she rides a motorcycle, she only
gives the men who also ride a motorcycle a glance. She may think that she is not
inferior to them." (Male, form 5.)

The "flower vase" in the third ad was perceived to be confident. Interviewees

emphasized that her confidence is based on her physical beauty. This is shown in the

following quote:

"She is a kind of show-off. It is like she tells others that she is slim and wears tight
clothes after losing weight." (Female, form 6.)

Interviewees expressed that the cultured nurturer in the fourth ad is kind-hearted

and caring. She indulges her children with toys. One interviewee said:

"I think she cares much about her children. She buys snacks and toys for them, and
she spends time to play and eat with them." (Male, form 3.)

Research question 3: Work and family life

Interviewees thought that the urban sophisticate in the first ad comes from a rich

family because her family supports her travel. They guessed she does not have a

boyfriend, perceiving that she is single and probably has an easy job. She might be

working in the arts or the creative industries. Here are the two typical quotes:

"She leads a life which is free from worry. It seems like she doesn't need to work. She
takes photos everywhere. She is rich enough to travel." (Male, form 4.)

"She has a good relationship with her family. (Interviewer: Why?) She travels alone
and she is cheerful. She is willing to share her happiness with others. I think she
shares her happiness in life with her family." (Male, year 1.)

The strong woman in the second ad was also perceived as single and career-minded.

She is strong and does not depend on men, so she is still single. Interviewees said she

is a model. She enjoys and concentrates on her work. According to an interviewee:

"I think a lot of men date her, but she despises them. It is because she is strong and
good at work. She has enough money to live alone. And she should be very good at
work and have a very high salary so that she doesn't need to depend on anyone."
(Female, form 3.)

Interviewees felt the "flower vase" in the third ad has an easy and relaxing life and

does not need to work. She spends time chatting with friends and going shopping.

Three interviewees thought that she is single, as she has to keep fit to stay attractive.

An interviewee put it this way:

"I think she lives alone. She may not live with her boyfriend, because she shares her
dietary method of keep fit with her friends. Her social life is quite happy. Her family
and work life should be colorful". (Male, form 5.)

Interviewees noted that the cultured nurturer in the fourth ad is a housewife. None

of the interviewees thought she has a job. She only concentrates on taking care of her

children. Here are the two illustrative quotes:

"She has a happy family life. For work, I think she concentrates on taking care of her
family. She doesn't have a job." (Female, form 5.)

"It is a typical family. The husband is a breadwinner and the wife is a homemaker.
They enjoy family life. (Interviewer: How about her work?) She is a full-time
housewife." (Male, year 1.)

Research question 4: Ideal female image

Interviewers asked the interviewees which one of the four female characters in the ads

most closely represented their ideal female image. In total, 29 interviewees selected

the urban sophisticate. Another five chose the strong woman and five chose the

cultured nurturer. Only three selected the "flower vase". Six interviewees did not

select any ads.

Thirteen female interviewees and 16 male interviewees chose the urban sophisticate

as their ideal female image. Interviewees emphasized that she is active and passionate.

Her passion to pursue dreams won interviewees' hearts. Two interviewees put it this

way:

"Because her life looks free. She can do whatever she wants and go to different places to experience more and learn more." (Female, form 5)

"She is doing what adolescents nowadays want to do. And only adolescents can travel alone, because they have the passion to explore new things. It is like we will not regret to do these things when we are young." (Female, form 6.)

Male interviewees stated that the girl in the ad is friendly and outgoing. They did

not like girls who are passive. According to the following male interviewees:

"I don't think girls should just stay at home reading books. My ideal girl needs to travel to many places and have different experiences. Experiences enrich a person to be sophisticated and mature." (Male, form 3.)

"I think girls don't need to be gentle and quiet. A bit adventurous, like boys, is better." (Male, form 5.)

Three female and two male interviewees selected the strong woman as their ideal

image. The two male interviewees thought she is attractive and sexy. A female

interviewee expressed that she looks like a character in the American teen drama

'Gossip Girl' who wears beautiful dresses and attracts many men. Another female

interviewee said:

"She has a stable job and her job is special. She is cool when she is riding her motorcycle. I like her because she doesn't care about others and she has her unique personality." (Female, form 3.)

Five female interviewees admired the cultured nurturer. None of the male

interviewees chose this character. All five expressed that family meant a lot to them.

Here are two illustrative quotes:

"I think the final goal of being a woman is to be a good mother, and have children. When we get old, we have children to stay with us. So I think this is the most ideal one." (Female, form 3.)

"It is because I shall be a mother eventually, and I think family is very important. I mean family members are very important for me." (Female, form 6.)

Only three female interviewees and no male interviewees selected the "flower vase" image. They appreciated her healthy and gorgeous demeanor. An interviewee remarked that she is generous:

"Maybe she cares too much about her appearance, but she gives me a feeling of generosity. She is sociable. Nowadays, having good social skills is important." (Female, form 6.)

Do interviewees' gender concepts follow the framework of GSSM?

There was evidence that Tobin et al.'s (2010) GSSM framework was adopted in the selection of the ideal female image. The stereotype emulation hypothesis was reflected in the selection of the urban sophisticate, the strong woman, and the "flower vase". Specifically, 13 female interviewees identified with the urban sophisticate's passion for travel and curiosity to explore new things. As a result, they expressed the desire to be like her. Here is an illustrative quote:

"Because she went travelling and taking photos, and stayed with other people. She went to different places. I think enriching one's experience is a good thing. I want to be her." (Female, form 5)

Three female interviewees desired to be like the strong woman because of her independent personality. They identified with the independent personality and perceived that if they had that kind of personality they could be attractive to many men. A female interviewee said:

"She looks like an actress in a US drama. She can wear beautiful clothing and guys are attracted by her. So I want to be like her" (Female, form 4)

Three female interviewees selected the "flower vase" as their ideal female image, as they identified with the gender stereotype that girls should be fit, and they perceived that they needed to be fit. As a result, they aimed to look like her. An interviewee put it this way:

"For me, she is close to my ideal female image. She has a good body image. This is my goal." (Female, form 4)

The stereotype construction hypothesis illustrates interviewees' selection of the cultured nurturer. Female interviewees chose the cultured nurturer as their ideal female image because they value highly the importance of family. Because of this specific gender identity, they thought that marriage and motherhood are important for females. Here are two illustrative quotes:

"She stays at home and doesn't need to work. She doesn't have to worry about anything, so she can concentrate on taking care of her children. Doesn't need to think about other things. Very happy and nothing to worry about." (Female, form 3)

"She values family. Taking care of children and housework etc." (Female, form 3)

Finally, the identity construction hypothesis was reflected in the choice of the urban sophisticate. Some interviewees perceived that characteristics of the urban sophisticate matched their own interests, such as travelling and taking photos. As a result, they selected this female character as their ideal female image to express their gender identity. In one female interviewee's words:

"Few people travel alone. She explores somewhere new, and I like something related to arts, so I think her personality matches with mine. I like arts and I also want to travel alone. Drawing pictures, taking photos, and pursuing freedom." (Female, form 3.)

Discussion

Based on Tobin et al.'s (2010) gender self-socialization model, the current study examines how Hong Kong adolescents interpret female images from gendered advertisements. The limited generalizability of the results beyond its 48 interviewees should be noted. The results show that adolescents develop their ideal female images from the ads that best suit their ideal appearance, personality, and work and family life. The result is similar to a previous study among adolescents in mainland China (Ng and Chan, 2014).

Using Hirschman and Thompson's (1997) three interpretive strategies, the current study finds that most of the female interviewees identified with the urban sophisticate. A few female interviewees aspired to be like the cultured nurturer. Most of the female interviewees rejected the strong woman and the "flower vase". Most female interviewees identified their self-concept with the urban sophisticate. They personalized their interests and characteristics with hers. Pursuing dreams and having courage to express views were valued. This echoes findings in previous studies that high scoring active agency for adolescent girls includes that females should pursue their dreams and females should appreciate their own strengths (Chan and Ng, 2012; 2013b).

Relatively few female interviewees chose the remaining three female characters in the ads. Only a few female interviewees aspired to be like the cultured nurturer because of her success in family life. The cultured nurturer indicates an ideal self-image that interviewees projected into the future, representing the future self that they were looking for. The future self endorses traditional gender roles in that doing housework and taking care of children are the responsibility of mothers (Chan and Ng, 2012; 2013b).

Most of the female interviewees separated their self-concept from the strong woman and the "flower vase". For the strong woman, only a few female interviewees valued financial independence. They preferred personality traits such as independence and confidence to gentleness and kindness (Chan and Ng, 2013a). However, the majority of them did not accept staying single (Chan and Ng, 2012). For the "flower vase", most interviewees rejected her because she is only concerned with her appearance. This supports the view of adolescent girls criticizing skinny female images in ads (Chan et al., 2012a).

Analysis of the interviews reveals that interviewees hold stereotypical gender role views about being single or married. Single females are allowed to be adventurous but married females with children are restricted to domestic roles. There is no space for self-actualization and individualization after getting married.

This study also investigates adolescent boys' ideal female images in the ads. Male interviewees' responses to the ads were not referring to their self-images, but were referring to the images of their significant other or their future partner. Almost all male interviewees selected the urban sophisticate and the remaining two of them chose the strong woman. Girls who are friendly and cheerful attracted them. Traditional girls who are gentle and quiet did not draw their attention. Adolescent boys are more likely to be interested in youthful and active girls. The two male interviewees who selected the strong woman only did so because of her appearance. None of the male interviewees chose the "flower vase", indicating that adolescent boys do not like females who are concerned only with looking prettier and slimmer; neither did male interviewees prefer the cultured nurturer, showing that they are not yet ready to visualize their ideal female image in the future. This echoes a previous experimental study showing that an advertisement using either a traditional or a modern female image has a more favorable advertising effect among adolescent girls than adolescent boys (Chan et al., 2014).

The present study shares similarities with a previous study of adolescents in mainland China (Ng and Chan, 2014). Adolescents both in mainland China and Hong Kong selected urban sophisticated females as their ideal female image in response to gendered ads. This indicates that marketers and advertisers should adopt similar strategies in these markets for targeting adolescents. In fact, most female characters in ads are of the urban sophisticate type (Hung et al., 2007). That adolescent audience

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prefers urban sophisticates in ads may be due to the high frequency of this category

presence in media. Further study should investigate this possibility in future.

Marketing Implications

Adolescence is an important life stage for the formation of self-concept and gender

identity. Marketers need to have a clear understanding of the self-concept of their

target audience in a changing social and economic environment in order to

communicate effectively with them. This study enlightens marketers in the profiling

of female characters in advertisements that can resonate with adolescent boys and

girls. First, the current study finds that contemporary and active young female images

are mostly likely to trigger aspiration from female adolescents and admiration from

male adolescents. This ideal female image is demonstrated through an active lifestyle,

participation in out-of-home activities, interaction with other social members, and

freedom from locality. She is also portrayed as being of a higher social-economic

status with more than sufficient economic means to pursue her dreams. Contradictory

to the dominant use of classical and mature females in Hong Kong advertising (Chan

and Cheng, 2012), the ideal female images among adolescents are not females who

put their entire energy into attaining a beautiful face or a perfect body. As

demonstrated in the findings of this study, the female character portrayed as a "flower

vase" failed to generate aspiration in a majority of female interviewees or admiration

in male interviewees. Marketers should therefore pay more attention to constructing a

female character with unique personality that shines beyond mere physical

appearance.

Unlike our findings among adolescents in mainland China (Ng and Chan, 2014),

the image of a housewife in the current study did not garner as much appreciation as it

did among interviewees in mainland China. The difference most likely lies in the difference between a full-time housewife and a married woman who is portrayed as successful in both work and family. The image of a full-time housewife was able to trigger aspiration from a small number of female participants who hold family values dearly. The image of a cultured nurturer failed to generate admiration among male interviewees. Marketers should therefore consider using the image of a cultured nurturer who is able to achieve work-family balance to gain greater appreciation from the adolescent audience.

The study presented here and a previous study (Ng and Chan, 2014) both point out the potential threat to a brand in the employment of a strong woman in its advertising. Marketers should use this concept with caution or use it only for a niche market. One possible strategy can be the downplaying of the competitiveness of the female character and the inclusion of positive social relations with significant others. Success of a female should be portrayed as an end product rather than a process. A pilot study should be adopted to test how target audiences interpret female images in designed advertising messages.

This study supports Tobin et al.'s (2010) GSSM that the integration and assimilation of gender identity, gender stereotypes, and attribute self-perception affect interviewees' perceptions of gender. The three hypotheses in the GSSM proposed how a gender concept becomes the product of the cognitive interaction of the other two gender concepts. The interviewees' transcripts illustrate the hypothesized thinking process, even though the strength of such interaction was not manifested. The results provide marketers with different ways of leveraging on gender concepts. For example, in constructing an urban sophisticate as an ideal female image, an SLR camera marketer can adopt the stereotype emulation hypothesis: "girls nowadays are

independent and pursuing dreams. So, you should go exploring the world with an SLR camera". Or the same marketer can leverage on the stereotype construction hypothesis: "I am a girl and I am exploring the world with an SLR camera. So, girls are adventurous". In this way, the marketer can help establish a normative environment that facilitates the marketing of SLR cameras to female consumers. Lastly, the marketer can leverage on the identity construction hypothesis: "I am exploring the world with an SLR camera and girls are adventurous, so I am a girl". In this way, the marketing communication will establish a strong gender statement and be able to resonate with a niche market segment.

Limitations and future studies

We would like to mention two limitations concerning our study. First, all the four selected commercials were not targeted to adolescents. The four female celebrities or models featured in the ads have different preconceptions from the consumers' perspectives. In future studies, a pretest will be needed to confirm that consumers have similar evaluations of or attitudes toward the different female models. The preconception among the consumers can be controlled if all selected advertisements feature the same model. Second, the strength of the focus group is that it allows the sharing of the social construction of the meanings that are attached to the topic. Researchers should examine what kinds of cultural meanings are related to the ads and try to find out cultural insights in future studies. Researchers can also contextualize the future findings against the cultural background.

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Appendix: List of questions for focus group study

1. Please describe the **appearance** of the female in each advertisement (if necessary, I can show you the advertisement again).

2. Please describe the **personality** of the female in each advertisement (if necessary, I can show you the advertisement again).

3. Please describe the **work and family life** of the female in each advertisement (if necessary, I can show you the advertisement again).

4. Among the four females in the advertisements, which one is your ideal female image? Why?

5. Apart from the females in the four advertisements, what is your ideal female image?*

    Note: * Answers to Question 5 was not reported in the present study.