

Sexual Issues: The Analysis of Female Role Portrayal Preferences in Taiwanese Print Ads

Chyong-Ling Lin

ABSTRACT. For a long time, female endorsers in advertising have been doing product information promotion in the market. However, with more and more highly educated women participating in the labor force, the conception of feminist depictions in advertising have become a perplexing issue. The traditional female role portrayals or stereotypes of the past are not able to totally reflect the expectations, behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of contemporary women. The author collected print ads as data from three types of the highest circulation magazines: foreign women's magazines (Chinese edition), domestic women's magazines, and domestic management magazines subscribed to in Taiwan to investigate what were the favorite feminine patterns and feminist depictions in a traditionally masculine society. The results showed classical beauty and girl-next-door images were "acceptable" gender-role behavior exposed highly in domestic magazines, which might contribute to conservative Confucian beliefs. On the other hand, being trendy was a significantly high preference for contemporary feminist depictions in foreign women's magazines; it might be considered as being due to the increased educational level of women and female labor participation rate in the work place as well as upgrading of social status.

KEY WORDS: feminist depiction, female role portrayal, stereotype, gender-role behavior

Introduction

Consumer behavior is reflected and addressed via advertising, where its meaning is encoded for objects or events that involve symbolic images to communicate culture, value, attitude, and belief. Female endorsers have been frequently used in advertising, and this has aroused extensive discussion over whether their gender-role portrayals properly reflect

feministic expectations in society or overstate female role depictions as liberated women, including nudity, which might create a misleading interpretation of women as sex objects in the public. However, advertising practitioners emphasize that they appropriately depict female-role expectations based on product segmentation and society perception. However, there is much evidence showing that there has been too much attention paid to female nudity and physically attractive celebrities in advertising. Regarding this phenomenon, though, Kamins (1990) explained that audiences cognitive and attitudinal responses toward attractive female endorsers were positive. Patzer's study (1985) concluded that "the physical attractiveness of a communicator determines the effectiveness of persuasive communication, and ultimately, physical attractiveness of the communicator influences overall marketing outcome" (p. 10).

The distribution or dispersion of symbolic feminism in ads is generally calculated based on the contemporary woman's specific behaviors and ideals. Advertising specialists create characterizations of the ideals through a translation of cultural context. From this type of advertising, the consumer might become conscious of her appearance and use impression management to create a more feministic identity among her colleagues rather than follow the conservative female role expectation of her past (Richins, 1991; Solomon et al., 1992). Nevertheless, what have been the favorite feminine depictions in advertising? Is it the traditionalist female role portrayal or a more contemporary one? Ford et al. (1991) expressed that feminine depiction preferences vary according to women's demographic factors. Women with a higher educational status favor a

liberated and career-oriented feministic depiction in advertising. In contrast, traditionalist women often reject such female role portrayals that they may define as being of “low social status,” “decorative,” or “subordinate to men.”

In Asia, Taiwan is a very traditional masculine society where women are restricted and often required to obey the “Three Obediences—to obey her father before marriage, her husband during marriage, and her eldest son in widowhood” and the “Four Virtues: fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech, and efficiency in needlework.” However, since global marketing strategies were introduced in the territory, Taiwanese women have been exposed to a new cross-cultural feminism, and traditional feminine role portrayals have faced challenges ever since. This study focuses on the application of visual expression, beauty patterns, body image, and sex appeal to describe physical attractiveness in advertising and how advertising is inter-related in the transformation to a new feminism in Taiwan.

Review of the literature

Feminist stereotypes

McCracken (1986) indicated that when a viewer/reader glimpsed an object, a process of transfer happens to the person. Advertising is not only a sharing of meaning with audiences’ beliefs and perspectives, it is also a modifying of other layers of cognition and norms. Physical attractiveness of the endorser and sex appeal in advertising can be traced back to the dawn of the advertising industry (Trachtenberg, 1986). In America in the 1970s, Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia noted that women were being narrowly defined as sex objects, physically beautiful and subordinate to men, in advertising. The main stereotypes were of the traditional housewife, mother, and clerical worker who could perfectly and happily solve household problems (Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia, 1977). The low social status depictions in advertising eventually aroused negative emotions, and the situation was not amended until the women’s movement in the 1970s and 1980s (Sharits and Lammers, 1983) and an overall upgrading of womens’ education and an increased feminine participation in labor forces.

More contemporary depictions of women in advertising began to reflect a more realistic “woman” (Pierce, 1997).

In a comparison of Australian, Mexican, and U.S. American TV advertisements, Gilly (1990) discovered cultural differences influence female role depictions. Australian advertisements generally showed an overall equality of the sexes, and Mexico even abandoned sex role stereotyping prior to the U.S.A. In 1990, the advertising industry acknowledged that women should be promoted to roles of higher position, authority, and power in business. Female role depictions in advertising should be neither less decorative nor subordinate to male roles. Further, Ferguson’s research in 1990 indicated that contemporary female depictions changed to charming rather than decorative. It revealed that women’s social status has been upgraded in some countries. Nevertheless, most consumers’ purchasing decisions



Figure 1.

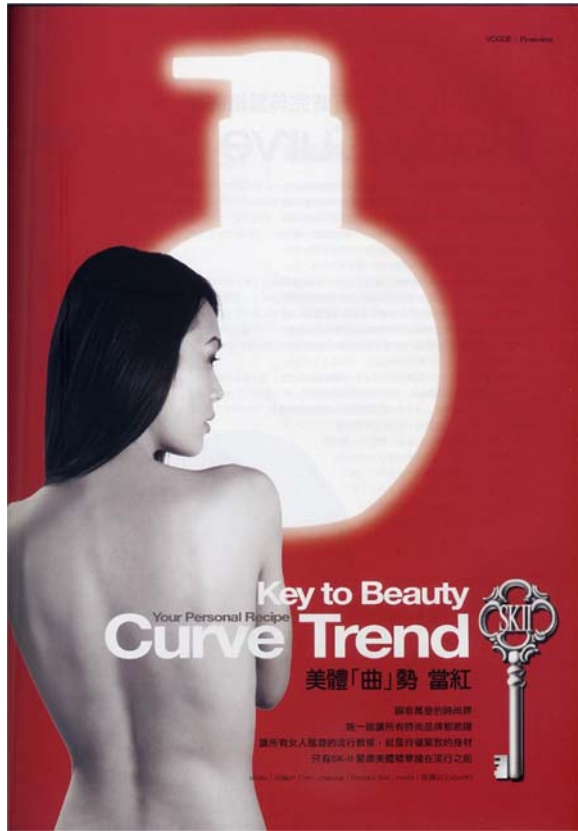


Figure 2.

still relied on traditional feminine depictions rather than contemporary ones.

Along with Asia's increasing economic status in the world, Western marketing practitioners have started to explore how to represent sex role issues in cross-cultural advertising in the Asian marketplace. According to Chinese historical records, women were inferior to, and dependent on, men. "Three Obediences" were a restrictive belief that women must obey the father before marriage, the husband after marriage, and the eldest son in widowhood. Controlled by this conservative concept, Chinese women did not have autonomy; their duties were giving birth to babies and taking responsibility for the family clothing and meals. Moreover, Confucian principles have been embedded in Chinese daily life for a very long time. The Confucian concept set the ideal of female behavior as being pure, docile, gentle, decorous, and quiet. If women did not follow and fulfill these principles it would imperil their relationships and corrupt social harmony.



Figure 3.

Traditional Taiwan was a conservative masculine nation. The social status of women was very low; they were uneducated and heavily dependent on men. The economic boom, which caused feminine involvement in the work place, led to an overall social-economic upgrade in education, income, entertainment, and cultural business, and also to a modified personal value system allowing women to pursue higher self-esteem and self-actualization. Moreover, the import of foreign information, such as in movies, TV shows, magazines, and advertisements, educated women about a different perspective on feminine values, visual communication, and aesthetics. Women were introduced to a new feminism that changed their sense of aesthetics and began to pay attention to "impression management" and performance. They almost abandoned the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" by instead, pursuing wisdom, confidence, and physical attractiveness. The phenomenon could be called the "Cinderella factor;" women invested themselves in



Figure 6.

respected, and socially accepted than less attractive ones (Lin, 1998); this idea is based on practical observations from marketing managers and advertising practitioners. However, ever sensitive to inconsistencies in gender-role depictions, women would protest this female role portrayal as showing women being subordinate to men, merely physically beautiful, and even nothing more than sex objects. On the other hand, the media described men as being strong in achievement, heroic, assertive, and materially successful. Whipple and Courtney (1985) indicated that women have preferred more contemporary and nonsexist role portrayals since their working status has been improved in society. The contemporary woman liked to see liberated depictions in advertising, but for some more conservative women who didn't like to be narrowly defined, the researcher would suggest other feminine role portrayals for certain products. Generally speaking, the contemporary definition of beauty has embraced intellectual competence, social competence, concern for others, and integrity (Till and Busler, 2000). This



Figure 7.

efficacy has been greatly influenced by physically attractive celebrities such as models, endorsers, actresses, and singers. Understanding an audience's purchasing decisions and emotional reflections could contribute to successful marketing strategies that transfer information into a visual image and when presented through a symbolic feminist in the media, could become the latest fashion trend (Englis et al., 1994).

When the media successfully magnified symbolic images of female celebrities in ways that can arouse the widespread adoption of a certain look, marketing practitioners can then concentrate on promoting series of products related to a certain celebrity such as apparel, cosmetics, accessories, and body-shaping commodities. This wave of the pursuit of beauty became a part of the contemporary belief system wherein an aesthetic prophet or cultural gatekeeper, such as art directors, film makers, and advertisers, become the promulgators of an "ideal" state of beauty and fashion. The advertisers attempt to create

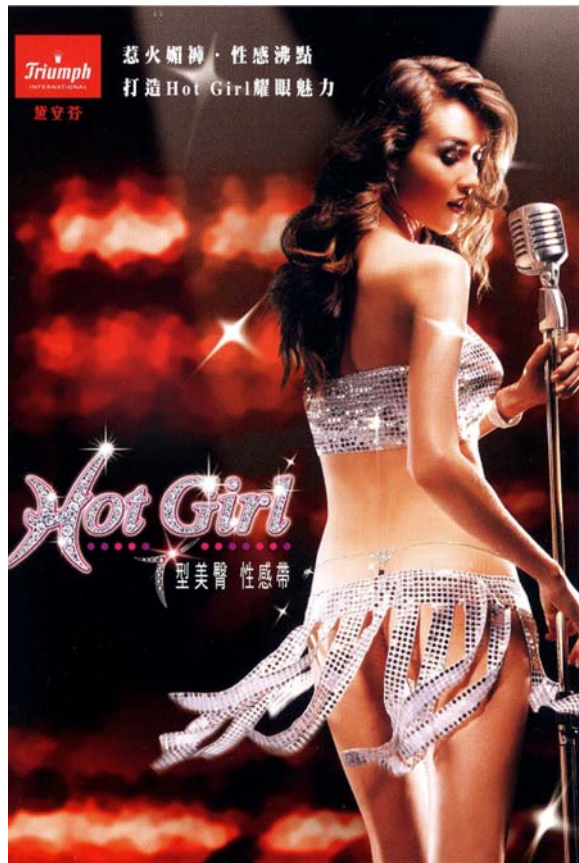


Figure 8.

the perfect match-up through manipulation of the audience's impression management of the essence of beauty in a given feminine celebrity with the endorser's pattern of consumption (Solomon and Greenberg, 1993). As a rebuttal to the above trend Englis et al. (1994) recommended that society should not pay too much attention to contemporary feminist depictions. The society, media, and audience at large should also attempt to balance masculine expression in the media instead of magnifying a restrictive standard of beauty and physical attractiveness focused on women.

Methodology

The purpose of this cross-culture comparison is to investigate local and foreign female role portrayals

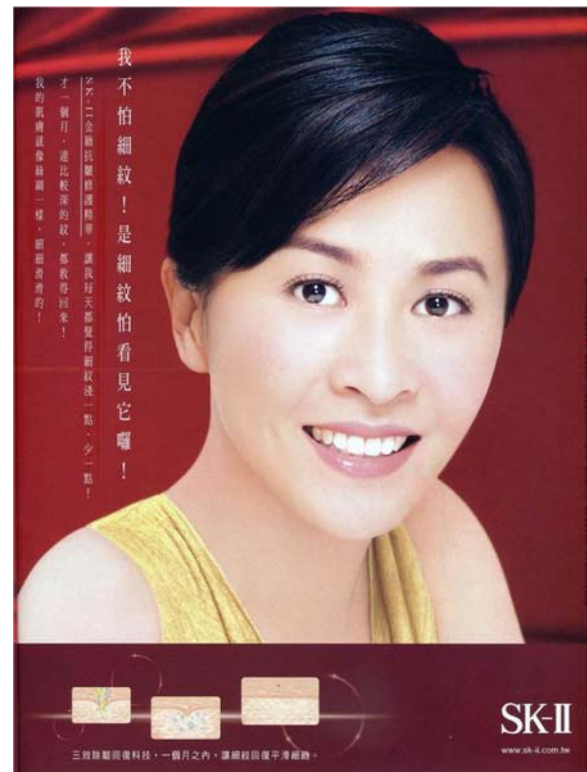


Figure 9.

and advertising appeal in magazines published in Taiwan. Interpretive content analysis was chosen to explore the patterns of female role portrayal, advertising appeal, and visual expression in ads. The advantage of content analysis is that it provides a framework whereby the symbolic content of any communication can be objectively, systematically, and relatively examined (Singleton et al., 1988). Additionally, content analysis includes another benefit in the area of theory development: data collection does not require a large population.

Sample selection

Three types of magazines—foreign women's magazines (Chinese edition), domestic women's magazines, and domestic management magazines—were selected for the study. The foreign women's magazines used in this study were *Elle*, *Vogue*, and *Bazaar*. The domestic women's magazines used in this study

were *Sugar*, *More Beautiful*, *Vivi*, *Bella*, and *Woman's*. The domestic management magazines used in this study were *Business Weekly*, *Contemporary World*, *Global View Monthly*, *Excellence Monthly*, *Smart*, and *Cheers*. The content of printed advertisements shown in these high circulation magazines was analyzed to understand the relationship and distribution of female role portrayal and visual expression in the popular media. The magazine advertisement samples were chosen from January 2004 to July 2004. For this study, 735 advertisements from the magazines were sampled to evaluate the research questions.

Coding and reliability checks

All advertisements in which there were one or more female figures were coded. Three researchers, who are faculty members of the Management College, Lunghwa University of Science and Technology, coded all variables for the selected advertisements. Three coding members coded 73 randomly selected samples in order to examine the average interrater reliability. The results showed the mean value of interrater reliability to be 0.866 and the reliability to be 0.95. All reliability values were within an acceptable range. Table I shows the multi-agreement of the coders.

The female role portrayal variables included beauty, sex appeal, body image, and visual expression. The coding definitions of the above variables, which were selected based upon experts' and scholars' previous studies, were identified in the following manner. *Beauty* included classic beauty, sensual exotic, cute, girl-next-door, sex-kitten, and trendy. *Sexual appeal* included the endorsers' nudity, physical innuendo, and verbal innuendo. *Body image* was defined as (1) a body figure that emphasized fitness, roundness, slimness, and/or height; (2) an endorsers' posture that could include standing, laying, kneeling, and opening or crossing legs. *Visual expression* included eye contact and the camera angle on the spokesperson (high angle/horizontal angle/low angle/frontal angle/oblique angle). The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding context surrounding female role portrayal, advertising appeal, and visual expressions in printed ads. The study also sought to determine the extent to which visual expressions were used in female role portrayals and

advertising appeal in order to merge a cross-cultural symbolic image into the Taiwanese context.

Finding

Table II summarizes the results of the study concerning the relationship between variable items and magazine category. The study showed that most female endorsers did not make eye contact, had a horizontal camera angle shot, and had a fit body image. Most endorsers' posture could not be easily seen due to the relatively small size of the frame compare to the pose; otherwise, the standing posture was a frequent pose in print ads. Based upon the study, it was revealed that feminine endorsers are not as likely to use much nudity, but are more likely to use verbal innuendo instead. The reason for this could be concern that "modern women" prefer depictions appropriate to product categories being advertised and might think that excess nudity is gratuitous.

Regarding feminine beauty depictions (see Table III), the study concluded that classic beauty was the most popular depiction mode in domestic women's magazines and management magazines, which could indicated that Taiwanese society still embraces traditional and conservative images of women. Nevertheless, foreign women's magazine showed a preference for trendy feminine endorsers, which could contribute to a more modern and liberated foreign society.

Discussion

Hofstede's four dimensions—individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and

TABLE I
The multi-agreement of the coder

| | Coder 1 | Coder 2 |
|---------|---------|---------|
| Coder 3 | 0.866 | 0.900 |
| Coder 2 | 0.833 | ★ |

The interrater reliability = $(0.866 + 0.833 + 0.900) / 3 = 0.866$.

The reliability = $3 \times 0.866 / 1 + 2 \times 0.866 = 0.95$.

TABLE II
The relative analysis between variable items and magazine category

| Variable item | Magazine category N (%) | | | | χ^2 |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------------------------|
| | FWM | DWM | Management | | |
| Eye contact | Yes | 51 (61.6%) | 134 (54.7%) | 113 (46.1%) | $\chi^2_{(2)} = 11.91^{**}$ |
| | No | 94 (38.4%) | 111 (45.3%) | 132 (53.9%) | |
| Camera angle | High | 18 (7.3%) | 0 (0%) | 13 (5.3%) | $\chi^2_{(4)} = 41.82^{**}$ |
| | Horizontal | 214 (87.3%) | 242 (98.8%) | 204 (83.3%) | |
| Body image | Low | 13 (5.3%) | 3 (1.2%) | 28 (11.4%) | $\chi^2_{(4)} = 388.35^{**}$ |
| | Fit | 225 (91.8%) | 225 (91.8%) | 211 (86.1%) | |
| Posture | Round | 13 (5.3%) | 11 (4.5%) | 15 (6.1%) | $\chi^2_{(10)} = 42.79^{**}$ |
| | Standing | 69 (28.2%) | 63 (25.7%) | 78 (31.8%) | |
| | Laying | 39 (15.9%) | 16 (6.5%) | 24 (9.8%) | |
| | Kneeling | 5 (2.0%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (0.8%) | |
| | Crossed | 10 (4.1%) | 0 (0%) | 15 (6.1%) | |
| | Open | 17 (6.9%) | 23 (9.4%) | 10 (4.1%) | |
| Verbal innuendo | Can't tell | 105 (42.9%) | 143 (58.4%) | 116 (47.3%) | $\chi^2_{(2)} = 12.04^{**}$ |
| | None | 143 (58.4%) | 155 (63.3%) | 179 (73.1%) | |
| Physical innuendo | None | 143 (58.4%) | 155 (63.3%) | 179 (73.1%) | $\chi^2_{(4)} = 25.10^{**}$ |
| | Visual | 93 (38.0%) | 89 (36.3%) | 66 (26.9%) | |
| Nudity | None | 109 (44.5%) | 123 (50.2%) | 153 (62.4%) | $\chi^2_{(4)} = 21.78^{**}$ |
| | Partial | 92 (37.6%) | 84 (34.3%) | 75 (30.6%) | |

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE III
Beauty depiction

| Variable items | FWM N (%) | DWM N (%) | Management N (%) |
|----------------|------------|-------------|------------------|
| Classic beauty | 49 (20.0%) | 102 (41.6%) | 101 (41.2%) |
| Sensual exotic | 38 (15.5%) | 12 (4.9%) | 18 (7.3%) |
| Cute | 14 (5.7%) | 16 (6.5%) | 41 (16.7%) |
| Girl-next-door | 24 (9.8%) | 46 (18.8%) | 49 (20.0%) |
| Sex-kitten | 46 (18.8%) | 42 (17.1%) | 14 (5.7%) |
| Trendy | 74 (30.2%) | 27 (11.0%) | 22 (9.0%) |
| Total | 245 (100%) | 245 (100%) | 245 (100%) |

$\chi^2_{(12)} = 124.78$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$.

masculinity/femininity—could be adopted to describe feminine role portrayal ad preferences in Taiwanese society. His assertion was that cultural diversity in different countries would reveal specific core values and beliefs in advertising (1984).

Individualism presents people as seeking personal preferences, wants, needs, attitudes, and actions, while living in and being accepted by a society. Collectivism could be interpreted as people being

more concerned with the welfare and advantages of a group of people rather than an individual. The study showed that Taiwanese feminist endorsers do not have exaggerated posture—couldn't tell (FWM 42.9%, DWM 58.4%, Management 47.3%). Ads with horizontal angle shots were very common (FWM 87.3%, DWM 98.8%, Management 83.3%). These shots generally represent an atmosphere of belonging and equality. *Power distance* related to

social hierarchy and power, and it can be used to indicate personal social status, wealth, and privileges. The study found that standing (FWM 28.8%, DWM 35.7%, Management 31.8%) was the second most common pose in ads. It could be concluded that conservative Taiwanese society still favors collectivism and would generally avoid situations that promote individual heroism that magnifies personal power in a group. The low percentage of trendy beauty depictions (DWM 11.0%, Management 9.0%) might support the finding that women were requested not to reveal personal emotion and individualism in ads. Classic beauty (DWM 41.6%, Management 41.2%) and girl-next-door depictions (DWM 18.8%, Management 20.0%) were the most frequently used in Taiwanese magazines; it was the opposite situation for foreign magazines.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to an unwillingness to deal with unknown conditions, which often leads individuals to avoid potential risk or to ask for help from experts. *Masculinity* refers to a social value comprised of a masculine orientation that focuses much more on assertiveness, performance, and achievement than femininity does. The study found that FWM had a higher occurrence of trendy beauty depictions (30.2%) than DWM (11.0%) and Management magazines (9.0%). This condition could suggest that most men in Taiwan might expect women not to be too independent and active in 'physical' characteristics. It could be explained that in the conservative masculine-oriented society of Taiwan, for a long time women were a form of property dominated by men. The changing social status of women, education, and occupational achievement have caused competition between men and women. However, the Confucian principles have been embedded in Chinese daily life for a long time. The concept set the ideal of female behavior as being pure, docile, gentle, decorous, and quiet. If women did not follow and fulfill these principles, it would imperil relationships and corrupt social harmony.

Interestingly, sexual appeal in ads has been shifting to verbal innuendo, away from physical innuendo and nudity. This decreasing of figure-focused feminine role portrayals might indicate an increase in awareness of women's self-esteem and actualization in modern society. Although previous studies have indicated that sex appeal in advertising could arouse

an audiences' attention, the method may neither lead to positive brand memory nor to long-term ad effectiveness (Alexander and Judd, 1986). The study shows that the lower percentage usage of physical innuendo and nudity patterns in ads could argue that Taiwanese women would like to abandon the image of being merely decorative and erotic. Contemporary women of Taiwan would expect merchandises to be well matched with feminine images in ads to properly promote marketable products and also create an independent and self-actualized depiction in a new era.

References

- Alexander, M. and B. Judd: 1986, 'Differences in Attitudes Toward Nudity in Advertising', *Psychology: A Quarterly Journal of Human Behavior* **23**, 27–29.
- Bovee, C. and W. Arens: 1986, *Contemporary Advertising* (Irwin Incorporation, Chicago, IL).
- Englis, B. G., M. R. Solomon and R. D. Ashmore: 1994, 'Beauty Before the Eyes of Beholders: The Cultural Encoding of Beauty Types in Magazine Advertising and Music Television', *Journal of Advertising* **23**(9), 49–64.
- Ferguson, J., P. Kreshel and S. Tinkham: 1990, 'In the Pages of MS.: Sex Role Portrayals of Women in Advertising', *Journal of Advertising* **19**(1), 40–51.
- Ford, J. B., M. S. LaTour and W. J. Lundstrom: 1991, 'Contemporary Women's Evaluation of Female Role Portrayals in Advertising', *The Journal of Consumer Marketing* **8**(1 Winter), 15–28.
- Gilly, M. C.: 1990, 'Sex Role in Advertising: A Comparison of Television Advertisements in Australia, Mexico, and the United States', *Sex Roles in Advertising*, *Spring* **7**, 27–38.
- Hofstede, G.: 1984, 'Cultural Dimensions in Management and Planning', *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* **1**(2), 81–89.
- Kamins, M. A.: 1990, 'An Investigation into the "Match-Up" Hypothesis in Celebrity Advertising: When Beauty may be Only Skin Deep', *Journal of Advertising* **19**, 4–13.
- Kang, M.-E.: 1997, 'The Portrayal of Women's Images in Magazine Advertisement: Goffman's Gender Analysis Revisited', *Sex Roles* **37**, 979–996.
- Leigh, T. W., A. J. Rethans and T. R. Whitney: 1987, 'Role Portrayals of Woman in Advertising: Cognitive Responses and Advertising Effectiveness', *Journal of Advertising Research* **27**(Oct/Nov), 54–62.
- Lin, C. A.: 1998, 'Uses of Sex Appeals in Prime-Time Television Commercials', *Sex Roles* **38**(5/6), 461–475.

- Lundstrom, W. J. and D. Sciglimpaglia: 1977, 'Sex Role Portrayals in Advertising', *Journal of Marketing* **41**(July), 72-79.
- McCracken, G.: 1986, 'Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods', *Journal of Consumer Research* **13**, 71-84.
- Patzer, G. L.: 1985, *The Physical Attractiveness Phenomena* (Plenum Press, New York).
- Pierce, K.: 1997, 'Women's Magazine Fiction: A Content Analysis of the Roles, Attributes, and Occupations of Main Characters', *Sex Roles* **37**(7/8), 581-593.
- Richins, M.: 1991, 'Social Comparison and the Idealized Image of Advertising', *Journal of Consumer Research* **18**(June), 71-83.
- Sharits, D. and B. Lammers: 1983, 'Perceived Attributes of Models in Prime-Time and Daytime Television Commercials: A Person Perception Approach', *Journal of Marketing Research* **20**(1), 64-74.
- Singleton, R., B. Straits, M. Straits and R. McAllister: 1988, *Approaches to Social Research* (Oxford, New York).
- Solomon, M., R. Ashmore and L. Longo: 1992, 'The Beauty Match-Up Hypothesis: Congruence Between Types of Beauty and Product Images in Advertising', *Journal of Advertising* **21**(4), 23-34.
- Solomon, M. and L. Greenberg: 1993, 'Setting the Stage: Collective Selection in the Stylistic Content of Commercials', *Journal of Advertising* **22**(March), 11-24.
- Till, B. and M. Busler: 2000, 'The Match-Up Hypothesis; Physical Attractiveness, Expertise, and The Role of Fit on Brand Attitude, Purchase Intent and Brand Beliefs', *Journal of Advertising* **29**(3), 1-13.
- Trachtenberg, J. A.: 1986, 'It's Become a Part of Our Culture', *Forbes*, May, 134-135.
- Whipple, T. W. and A. E. Courtney: 1985, 'Female Portrayals in Advertising and Communication Effectiveness: A Review', *Journal of Advertising* **14**(3), 4-9.

*Department of Business Administration,
Lunghwa University of Science and Technology,
300 Wan-So Rd. 1st sec, Taoyuan, 333, Taiwan,
R.O.C.*

E-mail: joling@mail.lhu.edu.tw