Male Interpretation of Idealized Model Images in Advertising – a Cross Cultural Study

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This study explores male interpretation of idealized male and female images and how their interpretation varies across different cultures (i.e. Western versus Far Eastern cultures). With the application of reader-response theory, three differences are identified: (1) criteria of idealized images, (2) perception of realistically idealized images, and (3) the transformation from good-looking images to good adverts.


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Extended Abstract

Traditionally, females are seen to take the predominant consumer role and much research has been conducted in this area. Because of the change of social structure, the role of males as consumers has become more and more important. However, the attention to males as consumers is still inadequate. This paper aims to investigate this area by focusing on male interpretation of idealized model images (both females and males) in advertising.

This study explores how males from different cultural backgrounds, i.e. Western versus Far Eastern, define idealized model images. That gender is seen as a cultural construct is a consensus among sociologists (Massé and Rosenblum 1988) and marketers (Costa 1994). Thus, the perception of idealized model images (i.e. physical attractiveness) may differ across cultures. However, little is known regarding how males in different cultures evaluate physical attractiveness of males as well as females. To explore the differences between two distinct cultures, it attempts to understand how males respond to male and female portrayals in various forms. Current research on male portrayals is limited to content analysis (Kolbe and Albanese 1996; Patterson and England 2000; Rohlinger 2002). If content analysis is not used, the studies mainly examine male sexual representations (Elliott and Elliott 2005; Rohlinger 2002), social comparison theory (Gulas and McKeage 2000), or gender identity congruity (Martin and Gnoth 2009). These studies came to the conclusion that realistic masculinity is appealing, but is masculinity the only factor in evaluating male images? These studies overlooked how an idealized image is identified, and more importantly, identified by males with different cultural backgrounds. In addition to male interpretation of male images, focus is also directed towards male interpretation of female portrayals. Studies on female portrayals date back to the beginning of the liberation of women. Traditionally, the female role in adverts is decorative and usually features gender stereotyping. Early studies focusing on objectification of females utilized content analysis to demonstrate how society saw females (Goffman 1976). This view is a predominantly a male view of females (Stern 1999). Later, research started to center around females as audience through social comparison theory (Richins 1991) with an emphasis on female well-being (Martin and Gentry 1997). However, three decades have passed since Goffman’s (1976) benchmarking study and the balance of social power between men and women has changed greatly. A renewed male view of female images is in need for an update.

These objectives prompt the research questions: how do males from different cultural backgrounds respond to the male and female representations in advertising? And what are considered to be idealized images? To explore these questions, the study adopts Scott’s (1994) reader-response theory, which signifies the negotiation between the meaning of the images and the reader, because beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. Twenty interviews were carried out among heterosexual males; ten were Taiwanese (representing a Far-Eastern culture) and ten were British Caucasian (representing a Western culture). Twelve print adverts, each featuring only one sex, were selected from women’s and men’s lifestyle magazines in Western and Far Eastern countries.

One similarity between Taiwanese and British males has been identified: their views on the idealized levels of femininity/masculinity for females and males. Both British and Taiwanese view a moderately masculine male image and a moderately feminine female image more favorably than the extreme masculine or feminine forms. This finding is consistent with the ideas of new men (Cramer, Cupp, and Kuhn 1993) and new women (Peck and Loken 2004). In spite of this similarity, the cultural differences in male interpretation of idealized model images are overwhelming and can be classified into three categories: (1) judgment of appearances, (2) evaluation of realistically idealized images, and (3) the relationship between the perception of good adverts and good-looking images.

The first difference lies in how British and Taiwanese see an idealized model image. British informants focus on bodies and facial appearances when describing idealized appearances of males and females. On the other hand, Taiwanese males ignore physical appearances. They focus on ‘inner beauty’, such as charisma for males and ‘qi-zhi’ (an inner grace put forward by a mixture of behavior and presence) for females. They tend to read facial expression, rather than facial appearances, in discussing the model images. Another variation in their views of realistically idealized images is observed. While images considered as naturally beautiful or handsome are appealing to Taiwanese males, images close to an unachievable perfection interest them even more. Taiwanese believe that an idealized image should be perfect and that a sense of unattainability increases their curiosity (or fantasy) and wish to worship the person. This is not the case from the responses of their British counterparts, who strongly suggest that realistically beautiful/handsome images are idealized. A final deviation on the relationship between model images and adverts is identified. British informants are able to detach their evaluation of the model images from that of the adverts. Similarly, they are able to isolate how good-looking the model images are from how much they like the models presented in the adverts. By contrast, their Taiwanese counterparts do not display such detachment. In other words, if the Taiwanese interviewees like the model images, they see them as good-looking and develop positive attitudes towards the adverts.

The study supports a sociocultural view of physical attractiveness. The findings are in line with Callow and Schiffman’s (2003) argument that a high-context culture (i.e. Taiwanese) is inclined to over-read into the meaning of the model images and connect the dots (e.g. the images) to develop a story (e.g. a positive relationship between the images and adverts). Moreover, the worship of idealized model images observed in Taiwan and the appreciation of realistically idealized model images in Britain may be a transformation from Hofstede’s power distance: hierarchy does not only exist in social status; it exists in physical attractiveness. These differences in interpreting idealized model images encourage advertising companies to re-evaluate the effectiveness of using idealized model images in different countries.

References


Moreover, because of the placement of the cameras, all of the participants in the no direct eye contact condition appeared to be looking directly into the eyes of their partner. Swaab and Swaab (2009) developed a device that allowed participants to see their partners on a computer monitor. The angle of the placement of the cameras was manipulated so that the eyes of one's partner were looking straight ahead (direct eye contact) or appeared to be looking to the side (no direct eye contact). The impact of visual contact during sales negotiations may differ between males and females. This effect was demonstrated in a recent study that found direct eye contact benefited females negotiating with males, on the other hand, are less comfortable with eye contact (Connelan et al. 2000) and focus on winning discussions (Tannen al. 2000; Troemel-Ploetz 1991). Moreover, females communicate in order to discuss and understand the perspectives of others (Tannen 2002). Consequently, the competitive intentions communicated by the eyes may distract males from the task at hand, and in turn, interfere with communication.

The present study adds a new layer to the understanding of how eye contact influences complex interactions for males and females by studying the behavior of a buyer and seller as they negotiate the terms of a hypothetical automobile purchase while wearing sunglasses. We illustrate that eye contact does not always benefit negotiations between females, nor does eye contact always impair negotiations between males.

Sales negotiations are an important facet of marketing and consumer behavior because many products and services are sold face to face and the terms are negotiated, e.g., on car lots and golf courses. The impact of visual contact during sales negotiations may differ for males and females. This was demonstrated in a recent study that found direct eye contact benefited females negotiating with males, but not males negotiating with males (Swaab and Swaab 2009). That direct eye contact impairs negotiation performance for males is surprising in the light of media richness theory which suggests that performance on complex tasks such as negotiations should be enhanced by visual contact since visual contact provides information about ambiguous or equivocal messages and allows people to communicate more quickly (Daft and Lengel 1986). Swaab and Swaab (2009) draw on several different areas of research to explain the contrasting effects of eye contact for males and females. The authors explain that males are more comfortable with eye contact and use eye contact to understand others (Connelan et al. 2000; Troemel-Ploetz 1991). Moreover, females communicate in order to discuss and understand the perspectives of others (Tannen 2002). Males, on the other hand, are less comfortable with eye contact (Connelan et al. 2000) and focus on winning discussions (Tannen 2002). Consequently, the competitive intentions communicated by the eyes may distract males from the task at hand, and in turn, interfere with communication.

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Sunglasses, Hierarchy, and Negotiations: Gender Differences in Eye Gaze During Interpersonal Communication

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Extended Abstract

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An important methodological difference between the present study and previous work leads to very different assumptions and results. Swaab and Swaab (2009) developed a device that allowed participants to see their partners on a computer monitor. The angle of the cameras was manipulated so that the eyes of ones partner were looking straight ahead (direct eye contact) or appeared to be looking down (no direct eye contact). As Swaab and Swaab (2009) explain, the communication of competitive intentions signaled through direct eye contact was attenuated in the no eye contact condition since participants could not look directly into the eyes of their partner. Moreover, because of the placement of the cameras, all of the participants in the no direct eye contact condition appeared to be looking