

# Representations of Beauty and Sexuality in Hong Kong Advertisements: An Analysis of Social Constructs in Transnational Media

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The purpose of this project is to investigate media representations of sexuality by examining the images used in marketing campaigns and advertisements occupying public space in Hong Kong. This investigation focuses on exposing the visual and narrative norms used to depict sexuality in Hong Kong media and examining the validity of the cultural values and attitudes implicit in these representations. Public advertisements were documented and analyzed for this project to assess the prevalence of sexuality as a marketing device and the way in which gender, social class, ethnic identity, national identity, and heteronormativity shape constructions of beauty and sexuality in advertisements. This study was conducted specifically in the region of Hong Kong, which, due to a unique historic and economic background, provides an ideal framework in which to analyze commercial depictions of sexuality in relation to the rise of global capitalism, identity politics, and mass media.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Analyzing Media in a Global Context*

The unprecedented rate of scientific progress in recent history has wrought changes on the fabric of humanity inconceivable to prior generations. Technological developments in information processing and transportation facilitated the exchange of ideas and people worldwide, presenting new frontiers in travel and communication. The rise of global capitalism and mass media ensured the homogenization of an international culture defined by images perpetuated in media and advertising that will undoubtedly produce unforeseen consequences in the future. The study examines the way sexuality, a socially constructed concept essential to cultural values and arrangements, is constructed in publicly displayed advertisements, a predominant and inescapable form of media. Specifically, this investigation aims to address the following research questions: How is beauty and sexuality depicted in Hong Kong media and popular culture? What are the visual and narrative norms on which these depictions operate and what cultural values do they imply? How do gender, social class, ethnic identity, national identity, and heteronormativity shape these representations of sexuality?

In answering these questions, I examine the social influence of visual media as it intersects with globalization and economic policy in a thoroughly international context, Hong Kong. I elected to conduct this research in Hong Kong because it is uniquely situated as a former British colony, a Special Administrative Region of China, and a highly cosmopolitan metropolis. This unusual background

is conducive to analyzing the effects of imperialism, globalization, and economic policy in shaping social constructs represented in the media.

### *Previous Research*

Prior studies in the field of media and advertising concerning representations of gender and sexuality demonstrate how male presence is often defined by power and ability, while female presence relates more to appearance and passivity (Berger). These works develop a clear understanding of the significance behind subtle nuances of visual representations and the cultural meanings they possess, which are manipulated by advertising and media organizations to create illusions of desirability or necessity to allure consumers (Jhally; Williamson). More contemporary media studies characterize mass media as a social institution, illuminating issues of power and visibility related to class, race, gender, and sexuality (Dines and Humez), specifically examining how visual information and criticizing visual media for promoting social messages and expectations that shape and reinforce hegemonic values (Goffman; Goldman). While modern international media studies contend that restrictive constructions of gender have expanded to some extent in recent years (Carpenter 158–168; Kaplan 141–159), they also confirm that sexuality, perceived as a marketing technique that transcends cultural boundaries, pervades advertising internationally (Frith, Shaw, and Cheng 1–16; Nelson 371–383).

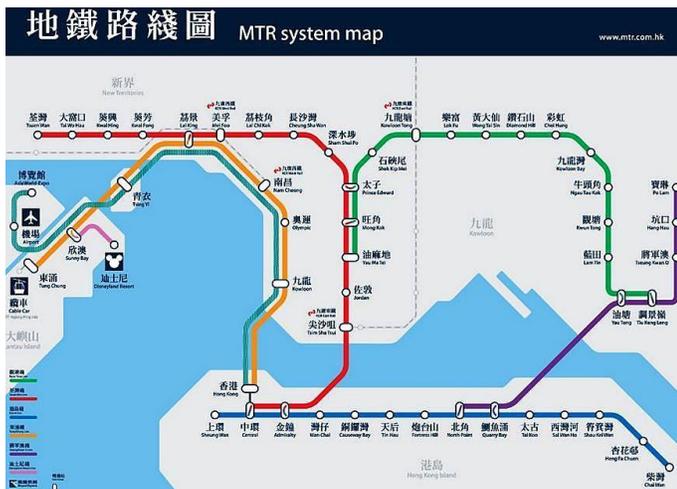
Much contemporary research addresses gender and sexuality in Hong Kong and Mainland China, highlighting the ways in which the combination of foreign influence and

complex power structures of Chinese society complicate sexual identity and behavior and the construction of meaning regarding these social norms (Ching). Additional studies examine Hong Kong's relationship to the People's Republic of China and political controversy surrounding pornography, censorship, and media (Jacobs). Broader studies on advertising throughout urban Chinese cities have also confirmed certain trends in the representation of gender, outlining associations between femininity, appearance and skin color (Mak 144–157), and masculinity, virility, power, and wealth (Song and Lee 159–177).

## METHODOLOGY

### Procedure

To implement this study, the underground stations of Hong Kong's Mass Transit Railway (MTR) were identified as primary areas of public domain in which advertisements were regularly displayed (Figure 1). The data collection process began with isolating a sample of advertisements found in these underground stations during the months of June and July of 2012 and documenting these sources for the data set. Documentation involved photographing every visible advertisement throughout the passageways and platforms of the station and recording how often individual advertisements reappeared within the same station. The data sample was then codified and analyzed to assess the prevalence of sexual imagery appearing in the average public area as well as visual methods of constructing beauty and sexuality. The data collected was then compared with findings from prior research on sexuality and media in Hong Kong and Mainland China as well as international advertisement studies conducted in other areas of the world.



**Figure 1.** Map of Hong Kong MTR Routes, from Marion Udall. *Hong Kong Public Transport Map (MTR-Subway)*. 2007. Photograph. Working in Hong Kong, Hong Kong. Web. 8 Apr 2013.

### Binding of the Data Set

Hong Kong holds a unique position as one of the largest metropolitan areas in China and maintains a deeply integrated culture of Eastern Chinese and Western British traditions, which emerged as a consequence of the century and a half long period of British colonial rule from 1841 to 1997 (Tsang). The majority of media and public signs contain both English and traditional Chinese characters to accommodate Hong Kong's diverse multiethnic and plurilingual population. For this reason, it provides an ideal location to examine the role of mass media in the organization of an international culture. The data sample was compiled from advertisements displayed in Hong Kong's Central district, specifically those appearing in the Central Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station, located on Hong Kong Island, throughout the months of June and July (Figure 2). Hong Kong is a massive urban landscape in which thousands of new advertisements surface daily. The diverse proliferation of images exhibited publically in the city is impossible to record in its entirety, so the data is limited to those advertisements occupying a very specific space and defined period of time. This manner of restricting the data set yields a random sample of advertisements, unaffected by researcher bias, that accurately reveals visual and narrative strategies of constructing beauty and sexuality.



**Figure 2.** View of Train Platform in Hong Kong's Central MTR Station, from WING Photography. *HK MTR Central Station Platform 4*. 2008. Photograph. Wikipedia Commons, Hong Kong. Web. 8 Apr 2013.

Extensive research informed the choice to confine data collection to the Central station of the MTR. The MTR system in Hong Kong is one of the most advanced and busiest metropolitan railway systems operating in the world and comprises over eighty stations and a series of underground passageways that accommodate approximately two million passengers on an average weekday (Lee, Lam, and Wong 554–558). These extensive

underground stations function as microcosmic commercial centers, air-conditioned and packed with hundreds of advertisements, promotions, and retail outlets to attract the commuters as well as pedestrians looking to avoid the heat and traffic of the streets aboveground, especially in the summer months (Figure 3). Central Station serves as a point of intersection between the green, orange, red, and blue lines of the MTR system, the primary transfer site for individuals commuting across the harbor from residential areas, such as the New Territories and Kowloon side of the city, to work in the city's financial hub on Hong Kong Island (Figure 1).

The position of Central station as the location of arrival and departure for anyone passing through Hong Kong's Central district makes it one of the most heavily trafficked stations in the city, thus designating it as coveted advertising territory for competing companies hoping to reach the largest possible audience. For this reason, every major ad campaign infiltrating Hong Kong secures a place in Central station to display popular advertising series that are then duplicated and featured in public domains throughout the city. As a primary source of still advertisements and a centrally located public area, Central station provided the conditions necessary to obtain an objective and representative data sample of advertising in Hong Kong.



**Figure 3.** View of Interior Passageways in Hong Kong's Central MTR Station, from C.K. Lauson. *2011 in Central Station (MTR)*. 2011. Photograph. Wikipedia Commons, Hong Kong. Web. 8 Apr 2013.

## RESULTS

### Codification of Data

The data set collected offers a comprehensive view of all advertisements publicized in Central station during the summer of 2012. The set includes 163 photographs, several of which document identical advertisements displayed in different areas of the MTR station. To analyze the data, the

regularity and location of recurring advertisements was recorded on the photograph of the original and duplicates were removed from the set, leaving a collection of 103 unique advertisements to analyze for this project. To codify the data set, each piece was examined and divided into categories according to three discriminating characteristics: 1) the type of product or service advertised, 2) the target consumer or audience, and 3) the visual depiction of bodies and people. Considering these characteristics in each advertisement revealed several effective methods of organizing the data in order to distinguish trends and patterns in the results. Arranging the data into groups based on these characteristics, particularly classifying types of products advertised, was extremely useful in identifying the prevalence of physical and sexual imagery, commonalities in the depiction of bodies and sexuality and the significance of implementing these depictions as a marketing technique.

**Product Marketed.** Documenting the type of merchandise marketed in each piece of data and conducting basic research on the companies and corporations represented in the random sample, ten categories were devised in which advertisements could be assigned according to their purpose, that is portraying a specific product as necessary and desirable (Table 1). Arranging the data in this way illustrates the incentives driving consumer culture and motivating production and commerce in Hong Kong and exposes the power of corporations monopolizing public advertising space and the extent of their influence over media.

**Table 1.** Types of Products Featured in Advertisements (n = 103)

Product Advertised	Total Sample n (%)
Food and Beverage	7 (6.8)
Entertainment	21 (20.4)
Clothing and Accessories	9 (8.7)
MTR Promotions	10 (9.7)
Beauty Products/Procedures	18 (17.5)
Travel and Leisure	6 (5.8)
Electronics	7 (6.8)
Civic Information	8 (7.8)
Health Related	7 (6.8)
Miscellaneous/Other	10 (9.7)

**Target Consumer.** Another useful method of distributing the data was to ascribe groups separating advertisements addressing distinct communities or audiences. Generally, these groups were delineated by gender, as specified target consumers tended to be blatantly male or female. However, the data was also scrutinized for marketing tactics

employed to attract consumers from different age groups, professions, socioeconomic classes, etc.

**People Represented.** The final arrangement employed to interpret the results of the data involved isolating the advertisements in the set that contains images of people or bodies and partitioning them into groups corresponding to the quantity of people and degree of bodily exposure. This system provided the groundwork needed to appraise the more abstract qualities of the data, like beauty and sexuality.

### Food and Beverage Advertisements

The advertising of food and beverage items constituted only 6.8% of the total set and promoted a variety of products ranging from sports drinks to baby formula. Marketing for Pocari Sweat, a popular Japanese sports drink, and Minute Maid, an American-based subsidiary of Coca-Cola, prevails in this category with two advertisements each, making up more than half of all food and beverages marketed in the MTR station. Notably, promotions for Pocari Sweat offer the most insight into constructions of beauty observable in the image of models enjoying the drink, whose sculpted bodies yield to masculine and feminine ideals (Figure 4).



Figure 4. One of two Food and Beverage advertisements selling Pocari Sweat, a Japanese sports drink.

### Entertainment Advertisements

This category received the largest amount of advertisements from the data set, composing about 20% of the entire sample. The category was subdivided into two classes, promotions for music and live performances (~8%) and promotions for film and television (~11%). In this group, 19 of the 21 advertisements employ visual depictions of people, contributing ample material, a total of 47 images of people (27 male; 20 female), for evaluating representations of gender and sexuality. Sexually suggestive imagery emerges in both subdivisions of this category, discernible in the partially disrobed artists selling their music (Figure 5), as well as in the

provocative embrace between actors publicizing their upcoming film (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Entertainment promotion advertising an upcoming performance by the pop group Hotcha.

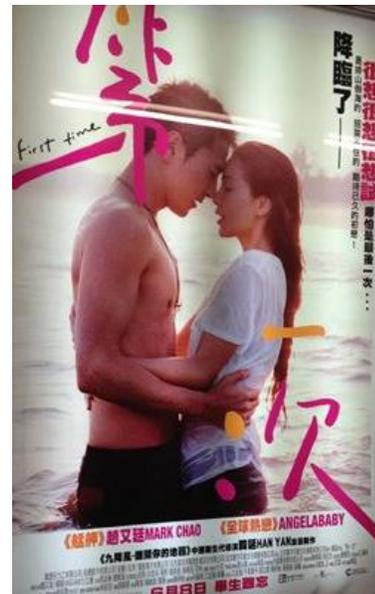


Figure 6. Entertainment marketing, highlighting the release of the Chinese film, *First Time*.

### Clothing and Accessory Advertisements

Only a small portion of the data (8.7%) marketed products classified as apparel or accessories. The commodity most emblematic of this group is not clothing but an accessory, specifically the wristwatch, comprising 71% of advertisements in this category. Aside from three local companies (Figure 7), the remaining samples are dedicated to advertising foreign but renowned brand

names like Coach and Tissot. It is significant to consider subtle disparities between the marketing approaches of local and foreign enterprises in this category, particularly Abercrombie & Fitch's shameless objectification of the male body, accentuated by the choice to crop the model's head and one item of clothing from the picture (Figure 8).



Figure 7. Promotion for Giordano, an apparel-retail business that originated in Hong Kong, one of only three local clothing/accessory companies advertising in Central station.

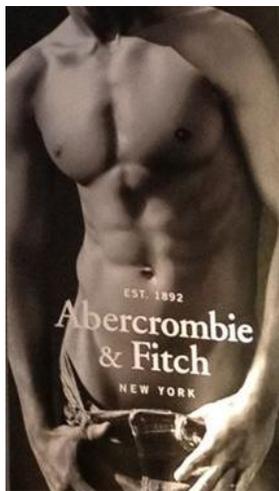


Figure 8. Ad campaign in anticipation of the grand opening of an Abercrombie & Fitch store in Central station.

### MTR Advertisements

This group is confined to a collection of 10 samples from the data concerning the MTR. These samples were further delineated as either guidelines of MTR etiquette and safety (40%), or promotions for MTR passes and ticket

specials (60%). These advertisements utilized 9 individual pictures of people in soliciting the purchase of MTR passes and compliance with safety regulations, expanding the repository of images used in identifying and confirming standards of beauty manufactured by the media (Figure 9).



Figure 9. MTR promotion imploring shoppers to explore the various retail outlets throughout the MTR system.

### Beauty Advertisements

Advertisements offering services or recommending products that enhance physical appearance (Figure 10) were catalogued under this title (18 total), and then labeled as marketing either beauty products (10) or services and procedures (8). Representing 17.5% of the data collected in Central station, beauty products and procedures are the second most common type of advertisement, second only to Entertainment Advertising by a margin of 2.9%. Though directed predominantly to a presumed female audience (Figure 11), a few samples were also found to target male audiences (Figure 12).



Figure 10. Beauty product advertisement example for instant weight loss supplement.



Figure 11. Beauty procedure advertisement for instant weight loss procedure targeting women.



Figure 13. Travel advertisement promoting Hong Kong Airlines.



Figure 12. Beauty procedure advertisement soliciting men interested in undergoing hair transplants to cure baldness.

### Electronics Advertisements

This small group combines all advertisements concerning electronic devices or appliances. This collection demonstrates trends in consumerism by indicating digital cameras, comprising more than 70% of the sample, as extremely popular commodities. It also entails examples of how advertisers depict beauty and sexuality to manipulate consumers regardless of the type of product being sold (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Advertising utilizing symbols of youth and beauty to sell a Nikon Coolpix digital camera.

### Travel and Leisure Advertisements

Advertisements promoting travel opportunities and vacation destinations were sorted into this small but discernible segment of the data. This sample is remarkable for its dependence on landscapes void of people in urging visitors and tourists to travel to specific destinations (Figure 13).

**Civic Information Advertisements**

This selection of data combines all samples geared toward the general population that publicize opportunities and information regarding public affairs. Eight of the advertisements documented met these standards and were subsequently sorted into one of two subclasses, those publicizing educational opportunities (~60%), those disseminating political messages (~40%) (Figure 15). This selection is unusual in that the representation of male figures exceed female figures, an uncommon occurrence in advertising data. This exposes a propensity to associate men with the public sphere, demonstrating how cultural attitudes are reflected and reinforced in the media.



**Figure 15.** Civic Information advertisement that outlines executive policies regarding internet use.

**Health Advertisements**

The group of advertisements consolidated under this description all sell products or promote information related to health and wellness. Slightly more than half of this category advertises specific products, including antifungal creams and allergy relief medications. The remaining portion of this data compounds advertisements designed to raise public awareness of various health risks, such as drug abuse and human papillomavirus (HPV) (Figure 15.)



**Figure 16.** Public service announcement on the importance of preventing HPV early, example of publicized Health Information.

**Miscellaneous Advertisements**

The data set as a whole yielded 93 samples, marketing products easily assigned to one of the nine, aforementioned categories. These samples account for all but 10 pieces of the data set, an array of advertisements sharing no discernible similarities labeled as miscellaneous. The majority of the set advertises financial services like banks and credit cards (4 total samples), a collection falling just short of the criteria for forming an additional category (must constitute 5% or more of the total data set). The remaining components of the data set represent diverse advertisements, ranging from the importance of butterfly conservation to promotions for optometric services, which resist alternative classifications by selling both accessories, like glasses, and health services, like LASIK surgery. Samples from this category attest to the ubiquity of sexual imagery in advertising, appearing even in the most unlikely contexts such as marketing for language-learning programs (Figure 17.)



**Figure 17.** Example of advertisement in miscellaneous category marketing an online language-learning program that harnesses sexuality as a teaching tool.

## CONCLUSIONS

### *Dominant Enterprises Advertising in Hong Kong*

Documenting advertisements in such a central area of public space and cataloguing the companies and industries promoted in this domain provides an enlightening glimpse of the most successful commercial enterprises in Hong Kong. The results of this study suggest international companies triumph over local business and monopolize primary advertising spaces. Consequently, foreign companies manufacture media for these public forums that is inconsistent with local culture (Figure 18). The devaluation of local culture and glamorization of external perspectives inherent in this arrangement is undoubtedly destructive and likely internalized by the local populace. This finding supplies an understanding of the interplay between economic systems and globalization in relation to advertising media and its potential to influence and establish social norms.



**Figure 18.** Prominently displayed advertisement for Coach, an American-based, luxury leatherwear company featuring Gwyneth Paltrow, an American celebrity.

### *Constructions of Beauty and Sexuality*

The categorization of advertisements for Beauty enhancers was the most useful portion of the data for delineating constructions of appearance and sexuality, the only selection in which every sample rendered images of people central to elucidating these constructions. Conclusions drawn from this selection indicate patterns in visual imagery that fetishize slenderness, whiteness, youth, and above all perfect skin, with over 40% of the sample devoted to selling skin care products alone (Figure 19). An equally intriguing finding made visible in this category of data is the unsurprising but nevertheless disconcerting predominance of gender specification in the indicated target consumer, overwhelmingly female in promotions involving physical appearance or attractiveness (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Beauty Advertisements and Gender (n = 18)

Targeted Audience	Total Sample n (%)
Product Ads	10 (55.5)
Male	1 (0.05)
Female	9 (0.5)
Procedure Ads	8 (44.4)
Male	2 (11.1)
Female	6 (33.3)
All Beauty Ads	18 (100)
Male	3 (16.6)
Female	15 (83.3)



**Figure 19.** Beauty product advertisement for Astalift skin whitening mask by Fujifilm.

### *Implications and Future Research*

As corporations and businesses bombard societies with visual imagery designed to shape behavior and desire, it becomes increasingly important to evaluate the personal and cultural influence these images possess. This study demonstrates the manner in which concepts like gender, beauty, and sexuality are constructed in transnational advertising campaigns and provides insight into broader themes of mass media and global commerce that will serve as a valuable foundation for future research in this field.

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