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Driven By Devotion - How Consumers Interact With Their Objects of Devotion

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ABSTRACT

Taking Belk and Coon (1993) and recent criticism by Bajde (2006) as starting points, we develop an other-related view of consumer-object relationships. By exploring acts of devotion in the light of the dialectics of self and other, this article draws attention to so far neglected consumer behaviors and their meaning in relation with objects of devotion. The objectives of the article are, first, to further examine consumer acts motivated by high emotionality as in the case of consumer devotion, and second, to challenge the usefulness of a one-sided self-centered perspective with regards to consumer-object relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Western society's shift towards a more materialistic, possession-oriented way of living has been widely recognized in research (e.g. Fiat and Venkatesh 1995). Nowadays we live in a culture of consumption (Slater 1997) where objects play many different roles in the lives of consumers. Objects bear special meanings (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Richins 1994). They communicate social status and class membership; they reflect personal style; they help to express one's identity. We also know that consumers build and maintain diverse relationships with brands and products (Fournier 1998; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988).

The researchers of the Consumer Odyssey were among the first to describe the deep meanings of possessions resulting from long-lasting relationships between consumers and objects (Wallendorf et al. 1988; Belk et al. 1991). Since then researchers have reported about collecting behavior (Belk et al. 1991), compulsive consumption (O'Guinn and Faber 1989), addiction (Hirschman 1992), impulsive behavior (Rook 1987), consumer desire (Belk et al. 2003) and brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006), just to mention a few oft-cited concepts.

Attempts to explain why individuals feel such strong urges to act upon favorite objects usually concentrate on the self and self identity projects in the lives of consumers as the ultimate rationale for favorite objects and possessions. Belk (1988) explicitly relates meaningful objects to the consumer's self, and introduces the 'extended self' metaphor of meaningful possessions. Ever since the introduction of the extended self (Belk 1988), self-brand connections, self identity, self-construal (Escalas and Bettman 2005), and other self-related constructs have proliferated through the literature as explanations for strong emotional bonds between consumers and objects. In a first attempt, Ahuvia (2005) opens up a new perspective. He asserts that self-extension can not be equated with the love of certain objects. Although love objects importantly contribute to the consumer's self, they are not incorporated into the consumer's core self.

Belk and Coon (1993) were among the first in consumer behavior research that acknowledged the existence of consumer behavior which can not be sufficiently explained under the prevailing exchange paradigm. In their analysis of gift-giving they come to the conclusion that a significant amount of interactions transcends exchange orientation. Their agapic (unselfish) love paradigm should grasp this kind of interaction, taking into consideration that " *in the intense love that we feel toward certain goods ... we exhibit a self-less passion that may transcend materialism. To*

regard consumer behavior as only instrumental is to preclude any real understanding..." (Belk and Coon 1993, p.413).

Bajde (2006) picks up the thread suggesting that other-centered behavior deserves ample consideration in consumer behavior research. Based on a critical reflection of the presumption of self-interest versus interpretations of other-centered behavior, he concludes that in the existing literature of our field the complexity of the socio-cultural character of consumption could not be unraveled due to a voluntary restriction to the idea of self-centered exchange-oriented individuals. As a consequence, he calls for the acknowledgement of consumers' other-interest in relation with consumption in order to shift views away from purely monadic interactions governed by the individual's self-interest (Bajde 2006).

In accordance with this position, we seize Bajde's (2006) suggestion and develop a view of consumer-object relationships as dyads marked by equality and reciprocity. The ground for the relationship view was laid by Fournier's (1998) influential work on consumer-brand relationships, which proves the legitimacy of brands as active relationship partners and empirically confirms the importance of consumer-brand bonds for consumers.

We embrace Fournier's (1998) results and attempt to go one step further. We perceive the object as distinct other whose condition and needs matter to the consumer, precisely because the person accepts his object as distinct, independent other and does not take it for an extension of his own self. Carrying the idea further leads us to the conclusion that consumers' acts in such relationships must differ from those noticed in relationships where the object represents an incorporated aspect of the self. It appears logical that one treats a cherished autonomous other differently than something that is subjected to and/or even merged with oneself. First and foremost, the accordance of otherness to the object also presupposes the acknowledgement of the other's individuality, personality and will. Therefore, acting upon and with the object as other, the consumer has to take into consideration the object's interest (cf. Habermas 1999).

We have settled on the exploration of emotionally intense consumer relationships, namely the case of consumer devotion (Pimentel and Reynolds 2004; Pichler and Hemetsberger 2007) because it comprises both aspects that we perceive as relevant for our study. Firstly, it provides an individual view on very strong emotional bonds with objects. In these relationships, it is more likely that consumers overcome their obsession with the instrumental value of the objects. Secondly, consumer devotion covers the behavior-related side of these relationships. Hence, we can analyze the so-called acts of devotion (Pichler and Hemetsberger 2007) in the light of the dialectics of self and other.

The article is organized as follows. First, we describe the concept of consumer devotion as it is defined in the consumer behavior literature. Second, we concentrate on acts of devotion which have already been explored in literature. In a third step, we deal with the dialectics of self and other in the context of interpersonal love relationships. This theoretical background originating from the fields of philosophy and psychology provides a balanced notion of relationships where both partners at the same time remain autonomous individuals (i.e. do not give up their self) and still take the other into consideration. Then we apply this view to devotional

consumer-object relationships. In a last step, a discussion with future research proposals sums up the article.

CONSUMER DEVOTION

Several authors describe the same behavior nowadays subsumed under the term of consumer devotion in different contexts. Rozanski, Baum and Wolfsen (1999) portray consumer behavior typical of devotees, like high affective commitment, high involvement and a high propensity to act according to one's beliefs in relation with the worshipped object, but call it brand zealotry. Kozinets (2001) reports of Star Trek fans which choose the term devotion themselves to make plain the depth of their bonds to this TV series. In their study of Macintosh customers, Belk and Tumbat (2005) discovered extreme brand devotion fueled by religious motifs.

In summary, two common elements are regularly discussed in connection with consumer devotion. First, devotion is depicted as a highly emotional concept, reflecting very intense relationships between consumers and objects, or activities (Rozanski et al. 1999, Pimentel and Reynolds 2004; Kozinets 2001; Belk and Tumbat 2005). Second, it has been argued that the term 'devotion' also implies religious fervor and zeal (Pimentel and Reynolds 2004; Kozinets 2001; Belk and Tumbat 2005)

Pimentel and Reynolds' (2004) work is the first in the marketing literature to define the phenomenon of consumer devotion as a distinct concept. They locate devotees within the group of committed consumers. Consumers of this sort are more than just loyal and committed, though. Devotees can be characterized by extremely high commitment leading to an outstanding level of emotional bonding with a brand. To be more precise, Pimentel and Reynolds' (2004) work indicates that devotion is linked to strong feelings like love, as well as feelings of spiritual or religious excitement, and adoration.

The model of consumer devotion shows how consumers gradually develop more and more commitment, get ever more involved and ultimately reach the emotional state of devotion. This state of high affective commitment in relation with high involvement and feelings of love and fervor may be attained as well as perpetuated via 'pro-active sustaining rituals'. These actions affect the object of devotion directly. Their objective is to prevent its re-secularization and the waning of the consumer's high emotionality at the same time (Pimentel and Reynolds 2004). Pilgrimage, rituals, sacrifices, or the display of the object of devotion are just a few examples of such pro-active sustaining behaviors.

In terms of reasons for building and maintaining these intense relationships with objects, Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) draw attention to the sacred object's function as a source for identity construction and maintenance, but also as a means of communicating this identity to others.

Pimentel and Reynolds' (2004) approach to devotion focuses on groups and their social experiences and behaviors, and thus likens what has been defined as fandom in the literature (Hunt et al. 1999; Kozinets 2001). Thorne and Bruner (2006) also use the term devotion to circumscribe special fan behavior. In their typology of fan characteristics, devoted fans are those who profess deep involvement, and are willing to invest in, and sacrifice for their object of fascination.

In a recent article, Pichler and Hemetsberger (2007) try to further delineate devotion. They maintain that the individual and private aspects of strong emotional bonds with objects have been neglected in the literature as opposed to social phenomena, which are vastly dealt with (e.g. (sub)cultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Kozinets 1997, 2001), brand tribe (Cova

and Cova 2002), brand communities (Muniz and O'Guin 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005), brand cult (Belk and Tumbat 2005), and fandom (Kozinets 2001)).

By carving out devotion's individual facets, they attach more importance to consumers' non-conspicuous and intimately personal interaction with objects of devotion. Via the integration of dedication as behavior-related component into the concept, they draw further attention to the acts of devotion, and suggest that examination of these should be warranted in future research. Even if they mention a quasi-altruistic quality of devotion, which might be responsible for the enormous amount of actions undertaken by devotees explicitly for their object, they still neglect to go deeper into this idea.

ACTS OF DEVOTION

Literature on emotional connections with brands, products, or objects in general, reports many ways in which consumers express and act out these bonds. Consumers can show their feelings for objects in very subtle ways. Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) found that the physical closeness to the favorite object, e.g. leaning against the object or touching it, in photographs is expressive of the consumer's felt degree of attachment to the object.

More active and obvious deeds motivated by the consumers' strong emotionality are emblematic for consumer devotion. Ahuvia (2005) speaks of "*labours of love*" (p.182), which require considerable investment of time and money, but are deliberately and willingly done, accepting that "*pleasure [can] be bought, but love [is] made*" (Ahuvia 2005, p.182). Along the same lines, Fournier (1998) refers to consumers' actions related to especially beloved brands. Aiming at the sustenance of personally valuable brand relationships, "*constant relationship work*" (Fournier 1998, p.361) is needed, mainly in the form of frequent consumer-brand interaction, consumption rituals and brand pledges.

Acts of devotion also help in securing the sacredness of objects. Keeping the sacred spatially or temporally separated from profane things may avoid their (re-) secularization, according to Belk et al. (1989). Thus, by setting the object apart from simple commodities one ensures, and simultaneously demonstrates, its special status. The continuous and repeated engagement in particular rituals fulfills the same function, i.e. it preserves and enforces sacredness; at the same time, it prevents the consumer from getting habituated to the object, with the effect that the object stays unique and central in the consumer's life.

A rather long enumeration of pro-active sustaining behaviors in relation with objects of devotion is given by Pimentel and Reynolds (2004). They list rituals, shrines, display behavior, collecting, creative efforts, pilgrimages, sacrifices, sharing/extolling, recruiting, and betting against odds. In the following we will take a closer look on a selection of those that have also been brought up elsewhere in the literature.

Ritualistic consumer behavior has first been investigated in depth by Rook (1985). His research set ground for understanding consumers' actual behavior in symbolic consumption. Rituals are sequences of expressive activities, which are dramatically scripted, performed, and repeated over time (Rook 1985). They may be acted out in private or in public, and aim at transforming an object symbolically (Belk et al. 1989). During these consumer-object interactions objects get imbued with private meanings (Richins 1994). Simultaneously, rituals structure the individual's daily life and add meaning to it (Rook 1985). One of Pimentel and Reynolds' (2004) informants, for example, narrates how he makes sure that he drinks at least one can of Coke a day and how he purposefully ritualizes the experience of drinking.

With regard to display behavior, Richins (1994) states that displaying possessions assists in the cultivation of assigned personal meanings. Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) and Kozinets (2001) both found that fans voluntarily show their venerated object, and even build shrines in order to enhance the object's visibility and presence in their home. These enshrinements of sacred possessions not only constitute worthy places dedicated to the objects; they also function as showcases and, maybe even more importantly, protect the objects from contamination with the profane (Belk et al. 1989).

Consumers with a high degree of emotional attachment have also been found to spread positive word-of-mouth (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). High self-relevance of products entails active word-of-mouth, too (Chung and Darke 2006). Devotees are likely to act as missionaries trying to persuade and convince others of their object of devotion (Pichler and Hemetsberger 2007). Likewise, passion for an object has been shown to lead to consumers evangelizing others (Matzler et al. 2007). Exemplary cases can be found in Belk and Tumbat's (2005) work on Macintosh cult followers, where the authors also confirm that „*Mac believers engage in proselytizing and converting non-believers*” (Belk and Tumbat 2005, p.211).

An examination of collectors shows how they sacralize items by integrating them into their collection. As soon as objects are incorporated into the larger context of a collection they transcend profanity and become sacred. This process happens on volition of the collector; it nurtures, but also reveals his personal attachment to the single object as well as to the whole collection (Belk et al. 1988). Within the boundaries of the collection the composed things remain special. Collections serve as element of a person's extended self and thus are hypothesized to contribute to the collector's self (Belk 1988).

All of the afore-mentioned acts can be interpreted in the light of the prevailing paradigm, which stresses the focus on self-interest and identity. However, another perspective might shed light on additional behavioral patterns, or aspects of acts, that have been ignored so far. We propose to regard the object of devotion as an equal other in a mutual love relationship with the consumer. Similar to Belk and Coon's (1993) argument for the application of the agapic love paradigm in consumer behavior research, we want to show that this new perspective can offer rich insights into behaviors that cannot appropriately be accounted for within the self-centered perspective.

Just to give a short example, we would like to refer to one of the numerous examples of collecting behavior cited in Belk et al. (1991). Among these, the illustration of Sigmund Freud as private collector of antiquities bears considerable insights into the emotional profundness and the behavioral consequences of enthusiastic collecting. Apparently, Freud's study room was full with antique objects from Asia. In sittings with his patients he had the habit of taking one of these antique objects, touching and fondling it. Furthermore, every morning before he sat down at his desk he formally greeted a special statue (Belk et al. 1991). These actions might seem peculiar and are only known to us because they have been witnessed, and later on bequeathed, by his patients. Belk et al. (1991) use the example of Sigmund Freud to portray typical aspects of collecting behavior. Still, they overlook exactly these two actions described above and consequently ignore their meaning. For a definition of typical collecting behavior these acts are negligible; nevertheless, from a point of view where emotional relationships to objects as equal other are at the center of attention, they deserve further thought.

THE DIALECTICS OF SELF AND OTHER IN CLOSE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

In psychology as well as in philosophy many theories on love establish its becoming and developing, its components, as well as the contributing and deteriorating factors. In Fromm's (1976) theory, love is a productive orientation which implies that one cares for another, knows the other, is responsive and committed to the other, approves the other, and is pleased by the other. He defines concern, responsibility, and respect for and knowledge of the object of love as the four essential elements of love. Ideally, a so-constituted kind of love enables both partners to grow personally. Consistently, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1994) highlight love's purpose and ability to foster the autonomous development of the partners' personalities.

Fromm (1956) further posits that love's aim is union with the other, i.e. to feel one with the other. Even if the term "union" might be misleading, Fromm's idea is that when this union is achieved both partners keep their integrity, and thus remain independent individuals. Union, in his terms, does not imply the merging of the two personalities; neither does it lead to a giving up of individuality by the partners. According to him, the object of love does not influence the way one loves, since love is part of a person's character orientation and thus precedes the actual relationship. Consequently, the object of love may not only be a person, but also an idea, or a material object (Fromm 1976).

A caring relationship as defined by Mullin (2006) bears resemblance with Fromm's concept of ideal love. It involves reciprocity; it requires that both partners are aware of the other as a distinct individual, exhibit willingness for self-disclosure, and actually engage in self-disclosure; it needs the awareness of the relationship with the other from both partners; and it implies a mutual interest in the respective other. Consequently, the other person is valued for his/her particularity as an individual as much as for his/her contribution to the shared dyadic relationship (Mullin 2006).

Solomon (1990) also asserts that love relationships do not necessarily entail the abandonment of a person's individuality or independence. He maintains that more importantly love enables a negotiation of the interests and the independence of the self with, and in the face of, the beloved other's desires and motivations.

Describing the motivations for unselfish actions in love relationships, Luhmann (1986) states that "*love motivates one to act, not for concrete effect, but because such action has, or is assumed to have, a symbolically expressive, love-exhibiting meaning*" (Luhmann 1986, p.26).

Looking at devotional consumer-product relationships from this perspective clearly shifts attention to certain behaviors, and more importantly, to their meaning which has previously been ignored in consumer research.

INTERACTING WITH THE OBJECT OF DEVOTION AS OTHER

Extensive information seeking can now be explained as an intense desire for getting to know the other intimately, to grasp the object's personality fully, and to gain a profound understanding of who "it" is. The resulting expertise in relation with the object of devotion not only reflects the genuine interest of the person in the object, it even signals a high degree of intimacy within the relationship. In so doing the person also enables the object to self-disclose. By letting the person explore the objects' unique characteristics, the object in turn enables the person to learn from it.

Consumers who assign certain special places or even rooms within their own dwelling to their venerated objects could be motivated by the idea of literally giving room and space to the object so that it can live and breathe. They build a realm of its own for the object, where privacy, security and shelter are guaranteed, and where the object can experience freedom and unrestrictedness.

Consumers in a relationship with an object of devotion are not likely to use the object in order to enhance their own status or to boast about it. More likely, they will treat the object with respect, as they perceive it as an individual personality. Their respectful interaction with the object will also be influenced by and expressed through their care for the welfare of it, as well as their consideration of its needs. One can think of collectors who pass on their collections to a carefully selected heir before their death (Belk et al, 1989; Belk et al. 1991). They might act in accordance with the presupposed interests of their object of devotion, i.e. their collection. If they feel they can no longer truly and adequately care for it, they might rather pass it on to the hands of someone who treasures it just as much, and who they hold to be a good partner. Similarly, in interpersonal relations, we know of persons who ask their children to take care of their spouse at times when they feel that their live is endangered or when they are already facing death.

The concern for the object of devotion may also lead to certain ways of treating it. Polishing, cleaning, and adjusting loved objects can be witnessed in many cases when observing enthusiastic consumers. Furthermore, careful restoration of the object ensures its ongoing existence, and is often a time-intensive proof of the consumers' love, concern and care.

Additionally, the genuine concern for the object's well-being can inspire more extreme types of consumer behavior. Complaining behavior and consumer resistance could result from a preoccupation with regard to a company's plans either to alter the product (which the consumer worships as object of devotion) or "harm" or "endanger" its unique personality in any other way. Consistently, word-of-mouth and related consumer activism can be interpreted as standing up or speaking for the object of devotion. All of these very active kinds of support convey the consumer's commitment to the object of devotion.

As the possibility for development and growth of the partners' personalities are crucial in ideal love relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1994; Fromm 1956), a consumer who considers the object of devotion as equal other should also allow and nurture its self-expansion. This could be realized by means of transforming the appearance of the object as it can be seen in consumer innovations. Still, it is relevant to make sure that the core essence of the object remains unchanged. In an ideal and equal relationship the aim is not to change the object; it is to facilitate its own development instead.

Reciprocity is a basic requirement for all interpersonal relationships (Fromm 1956). Consumers can ensure this reciprocity in relation with the object of devotion by sharing what they have; be it their time, space or money. As a result, their relationship will stay vital and even evolve, and perceived intimacy and closeness may increase, as shown by Pimentel and Reynolds' (2004) in their account of the usefulness of proactive sustaining behaviors. Consumers who encounter intimate and close relationships with objects that are respectfully regarded as a personality of its own will also respect the other's needs in terms of space, time, and freedom. Devotion, therefore, is enacted differently than sheer passionate, compulsive, or addictive forms of relationships.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

"The legacy of self-interest" (Bajde, 2006) has dominated consumer research for decades. Early critics of a purely self-centered view have been fruitful, but the paradigm of self-interest

still prevails. In this article we strive to promote a different view of the consumer as both-interested in developing her self *and* the other. Despite all self-related and self-interested behavior, which we do not disavow, consumers also show other-related behavior towards objects of devotion and special possessions. Consumer devotion goes beyond ordinary feelings of desire, emotion, or attachment toward products. Consumer behavior literature has widely dismissed other-related consumer behavior and exiled it in the domain of social and cause-related marketing. However, devoted consumers are more than silly-looking adorers and bragging evangelists of their fetishes. Instead, they engage in respectful and caring relationships with objects and their producing companies in an attempt to compensate for their widely de-encharmed, mundane and self-centered lives (cf. Fromm, 1976). Instead of exploring the motivational definition and debate of other-related behavior, we decided to emphasize the behavioral aspect instead. Thus, the concrete acts of consumers in these specific object-relationships are the focus of our interest.

By doing so we strive for contributing to the development of the concept of consumer devotion. Using the distinct perspective explained above we were able to uncover forms of behaviors or acts of devotion, which cannot solely be explained by sheer self-interest, self-centeredness, or by the need to define or develop self-identity. We contribute to current research on consumer-object relationships by carving out distinct, private patterns of behavior, or acts of devotion that have been commonly overlooked, as for instance behaviors related to "giving room to" the other to develop her own identity and personality; or which bare new meanings upon closer inspection. Objects, then, are not (always only) 'mine' thus are no possessions, but rather self-standing and respected, 'outstanding' objects of devotion. This leads consumers to show respect for, take care of, gain expertise in, give room to, engage in sharing with, giving freedom to, help develop (innovate), carefully restore, and pass on their objects of devotion.

We also contribute to the extant literature on consumer-object relationships by introducing a complementary yet distinct concept apart from desire, brand cult, fandom, and other community-related forms of consumption hype: consumer-object relationships which encompass respectful, close, and cheerful acts of devotion.

Future research is needed that aims to uncover, investigate, and understand these acts of devotion. By introducing the gift-giving and love metaphor, Belk and Coon (1993), and Ahuvia (2005) have opened the field to a more balanced view of consumer behavior. We should further engage in research that accounts for both, self-centered and other-oriented consumer behavior, for several reasons. First, it allows consumer behavior theorists to better understand seemingly peculiar behavior and motivations. Secondly, it provides valuable insights for consumers themselves; how they should relate with their favorite objects without overextending relationships with objects; how they should construct their intimate relationships with objects without getting addicted and jeopardizing their personal relationships.

The main limitation of the present work is that our theoretical findings cannot be justified by empirical evidence within the scope of this article. Our further research will try to account for this lack and provide data.

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Skin Lightening and Beauty in Four Asian Cultures

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ABSTRACT

“Whiteness” or having white skin is considered an important element in constructing female beauty in Asian cultures. A dramatic growth of skin whitening and lightening products has occurred in Asian markets. Contemporary meanings of whiteness are influenced by Western ideologies as well as traditional Asian values and beliefs. In this study, we analyze print advertisements for skin whitening and lightening products in four Asian societies—India, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea. We compare the verbal messages and visual images for both global brands and local brands and across countries. We find that whiteness in these Asian cultures is both empowering and disempowering as well as both global and local in character.

INTRODUCTION

“White skin” has emerged as a central desideratum of consumer culture in affluent Asia. Not only does skin lightness affect perceptions of a woman’s beauty, it also affects her marital prospects, job prospects, social status, and earning potential (Ashikari 2003b; Goon and Craven 2003; Leslie 2004). The beauty ideal of white skin in Asia predates colonialism and the introduction of Western notions of beauty (e.g., Wagatsuma 1967). Contemporary meanings of white skin combine Western mass-mediated ideologies and traditional Asian cultural values. The popularity of Caucasian and Eurasian models reflects the postcolonial structure of commoditization and consumerism and is still influenced by a colonial past (Goon and Craven 2003). Western-centrism and cultural hegemony interact with Asian ideologies like Confucianism in strengthening the ideal of whiteness (Russell 1996).

Asian countries have long histories of utilizing white skin as a key criterion of personal beauty. In Korea, flawless skin like white jade and an absence of freckles and scars have been preferred since the first dynasty in Korean history (the *Gojoseon Era*, 2333-108 B.C.E.). Various methods of lightening the skin have long been used in Korea, such as applying *miansoo* lotion and dregs of honey (Jeon, 1987). In Japan, applying white powder to the face has been considered a woman’s moral duty since the *Edo* period (Ashikari 2003a; 2003b; 2005). In India, white skin is considered as a mark of class and caste as well as an asset (Leistikow 2003). Historically, women (especially married women) in South India bathed with turmeric. Apart from the health benefits involved, it also has skin lightening and anti-inflammatory properties. In China, “milk-white” skin is a symbol of beauty and some Chinese women used to swallow powdered pearls in the hopes of becoming whiter (*China Daily* 2006). Although there are cultural variations, the desire for light skin is universal (Isa and Kramer 2003; Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992).

“Whiteness” remains an important element in contemporary postcolonial Asian understandings of beauty and has become a commodity in the marketplace (Goon and Craven 2003). Skin lightening products are popular not only in Asian cultures, but in other non-white cultures as well (e.g., Burke 1996; Del Giudice 2002; Duany 1998; Hall 1995; Lovell and Wood 1993). Fueled by increasing Asian wealth and growing consumer cultures, skin

whitening and lightening products have recorded dramatic growth in Asia during the past several decades (Ashikari 2005). Mass media and the fashion industry play important roles in reinforcing the yearning for white skin. Advertisements also play important roles in shaping ideal self images for consumers (Belk and Pollay 1985), and are the focus of our research.

We studied how advertisers portray skin color to women in Asian cultures. Content analysis and semiotic analysis were used in exploring the notion of white skin in four Asian societies (India, Japan, Korea and Hong Kong). We compared the cultural similarities and differences in advertising skin whitening and lightening products by both global brands and domestic brands. We also studied the metaphors used in advertisements in order to understand the process of constructing the meanings of “whiteness” in different Asian cultures.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Globalizing Notions of Beauty

In India, the words for fair and beautiful are synonymous (Franklin 1968; Hall 1995). In one view “whiteness” and “paleness” are distinct but related concepts, “signifying both distinction between, and collusion with, the historical myths of paleness associated with feminine discourses of beauty, and ‘whiteness’ as an imperialist, racialized value of superiority” (Goon and Craven 2003). Although, as we have already noted, ideals of whiteness embedded in Asian notions of female beauty predate colonialism and other forms of contact with the West, the prevalence of Caucasian models in many Asian advertisements for beauty products raises the possibility that beauty ideals are or are becoming global. According to a study of the Human Relations Area Files more than 20 years ago, of 312 different cultures, 51 used skin color as a criterion of beauty, and in all but four of these lighter skin was preferred (Van den Berge and Frost 1986). Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1992) note that while white is associated with purity, righteousness, decency, and auspiciousness, black is associated with wickedness, villainy, menace, and illegality. In Asia, skin lightening as well as cosmetic surgeries that provide a more Western appearance (e.g., Kaw 1993; Miller 2003) have been taken by some as evidence of the global appeal of Western and Caucasian standards of beauty (Goon and Craven 2003; Isa and Kramer 2003). But others reject this conclusion, pointing for example to the desire of white Western men for the dark exotic “Other” (e.g., Hunter 2005). This is a weak argument however in that the transgressive desire for Otherness may offer an element of perceived danger and excitement but has hardly brought about the homogenization of skin pigmentation through widespread intermarriage of dark skinned and light skinned people.

During the colonial era, and arguably before and after as well, rather than a homogenizing blending of skin color, there has instead been an attempt to distinguish the dark Other as “primitive” and inferior, thereby supporting the mission of the light skinned colonialist to conquer and control the natives of Africa, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Polynesia (Torgovnick 1990). A