

Refreshing Beers and Caring Skin: The Construction of Gender in Japanese Television Commercials

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<keywords>

Gender, Television Commercials, Ethnomethodology, Food

<ABSTRACT>

Past research has not explained how gender related attitudes and activities vary across social situations presented in advertisements on television. Our paper does this by examining how gender is constructed in Japanese food and non-food television commercials. An inductive analysis that conceptualizes gender as a situated accomplishment is employed. We discover that commercials for alcoholic beverages, cosmetics and home cleaners reflect men's and women's "natural and normal natures" in Japanese society. Food commercials, however, by extracting food preparation and consumption from its social context, mask women's responsibilities surrounding food preparation. Based on these results, we argue that television commercials express an important contradiction of capitalism -- the need to reflect normative conceptions of gender while simultaneously attempting to sell products to people regardless of how they "do" their gender, class, or race.

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have conducted numerous studies of gender portrayals in television commercials. Early research focused on the stereotypical bias of sex roles (Dominick and Rauch 1972; McArthur and Resko 1975). Later studies indicated that some differences in sex role portrayals noted in the earlier research were fading (Bretl and Cantor 1988; Ferrante et al. 1988). However, all of these studies have applied a static interpretation of gender and have not examined how gender is constructed in specific settings within television advertisements.

Our objective is to move beyond this level and develop a comprehensive assessment of how gender is utilized for promoting consumption in contemporary capitalist societies. We do this by investigating how gender is constructed through an analysis of the social context that is created in each advertisement. Through this approach, we determine how gender is expressed in various settings and whether sex role presentations in a particular setting are associated with how gender is constructed and done.

The empirical focus of our analysis is Japanese television commercials. Studying gender in Japanese television

commercials is instructive because much of the literature on television commercials and gender has been based upon studies carried out in the United States[1] (Sengupta, 1995). Although we do not conduct a direct empirical comparison of television commercials in Japan and the U.S., we can compare our results with those from previous studies of gender portrayals in TV commercials, most of which have been conducted in the U.S. By analyzing commercials from Japan, our study not only will examine how gender is constructed in various product settings, but also will provide an assessment of how gender is expressed and manipulated in the electronic media of a non-Occidental, advanced industrial society.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In studies of how gender is portrayed in television commercials, gender generally has been regarded as little more than a role or a status. A "role" usually has been defined as a mixture of occupation and status (Craig 1992; McArthur & Resko 1975; Rack and McMullen 1987). Utilizing a sex role approach, Dominick and Rauch (1972) demonstrated how

women were frequently portrayed in television commercials as sex objects, housewives, or mothers, but hardly ever as professionals or working wives. McArthur and Resko (1975) showed how feminine roles were normally relational in character (e.g., spouse or parent), while masculine roles were independent (e.g., worker or professional).

Later studies illustrated how women were coming to be "portrayed in a wider range of occupations and appeared more frequently in settings outside the home" (Ferrante et al. 1988, 231). Courtney and Whipple (1983) concluded that prime time commercials in the 1980s were still more likely to show women in the home and men in business settings, but that the differences were decreasing. Bretl and Cantor (1988) confirmed that men were increasingly being displayed in television commercials as spouses and parents, and with no obvious occupation. Lovdal (1989) found a decrease in the number of female product representatives for household items and in the number of male representatives for non-domestic items. Together, such findings suggested that sex role differences in television advertisements had begun to fade.

At the same time, some interesting consistencies in the presentation of "sex roles" were being discovered. One was that the majority of voiceovers continued to be male (Bretl and Cantor 1988; Dominick and Rauch 1972; Ferrante et al. 1988; Lovdal 1989). Another was that in spite of the decrease in the number of women portrayed in domestic settings, women were still more likely than men to be seen in those settings (Bretl and Cantor, 1988). Furthermore, women were more likely than men to be shown as users of the products they advertised (Bretl and Cantor 1988; Lovdal 1989). In a study comparing Japanese and U.S. TV commercials, Sengupta (1995) found that U.S. women were more likely than Japanese women to be portrayed as business executives, while the latter were more likely to be seen as entertainers.

Nonetheless, studies of sex roles in television commercials have suggested that the portrayals of men and women have become more alike, especially in the U.S. However, this research trajectory suffers from an inability to recognize the social contexts within which gender is constructed. It has failed to understand "the true nature of the images of the sexes in commercials" (Courtney and Whipple 1983, 23). Thus, Bretl and Cantor's finding (1988) that men were being increasingly displayed as spouses and parents should not necessarily be interpreted as indicating a change in sex roles. For example, men can be shown in aggressive play with children, such as teaching them sports. Similarly, while women are being presented more in

occupational situations, they may be portrayed as secretaries or nurses. Focusing on status and roles is insufficient for revealing whether gender is being reconstructed along normative lines. To understand whether gender differences have become less pronounced, we must consider the social contexts of the activities that are performed.

Some ethnomethodological studies have developed a more intricate method for assessing the complexities of gender. This strategy assumes that people design their actions in a manner that allows others to assess gender on the basis of shared normative conceptions of what are 'essential' and 'natural' womanly and manly natures. We agree with West and Zimmerman (1987) that this "doing gender" is not an optional behavior, as Goffman (1976) argues, but a mandatory and serious undertaking. More importantly, the accomplishment of gender, race and class are linked. Together, these serve as the mechanisms for reproducing social inequality in contemporary society (West and Fenstermaker, 1994).

Steenland (1988) examined character portrayals, especially those of adolescent girls, and the messages that were conveyed in over 200 prime time television programs. She found that plots focused primarily on shopping, grooming and dating, with less emphasis given to school matters, academic interests, career goals or future plans. As a result, "girls' looks count more than their brains" (Steenland 1988, 3). McCracken demonstrated how each magazine segment, "from individual ads and parts thereof, to fashion features, advice columns, and voyeuristic documentary fiction" (McCracken 1993, 299) presents readers with attractive fantasies and pleasures as inducements to purchase products. These studies suggest that media images are utilized to reproduce stereotypical images of women.

Since sex categories are omnirelevant to social life (West and Zimmerman 1987), people accomplish their gender by using a variety of resources far beyond the roles or status they occupy. It is through interactions with respect to normative conceptions that people "do gender" in social situations. We cannot analyze gender simply as a "role" and without understanding its situated accomplishment (Fenstermaker et al. 1991), because different normative conceptions of gender may be emphasized or muted depending on the situation. To comprehend how gender is presented in advertisements, one must analyze the context wherein gender is performed and the mechanisms by which gender is accomplished.

An early effort at understanding such contexts was Goffman's analysis of the depiction of gender in print advertisements. He conceptualized displays as ritual-like behaviors with "a dialogic

character of a statement-reply kind" (Goffman 1976, 1). The presence or absence of symmetry in displays were interpreted as establishing deference or dominance. Thus, "gender display" was distinguished as the behavioral styles of how men and women participate in social situations. Goffman found that women are more likely than men to touch their face or neck in advertisements, and women had a tendency to be "pictured using their fingers and hands to trace the outlines of an object or to cradle it or to caress its surface" (ibid: 29).

Using a similar approach in comparing examples of gender display in 1973 and 1986, Laxier-Smith found that the "ritualization of subordination" of women was not declining (Lazier-Smith 1989). Similarly, Massé and Rosenblum (1988) discovered that female figures in magazine advertisements were more likely than male ones to be stance-subordinated. Female figures were also more likely to show connections with other figures through smiles, touches and gazes. These studies helped to demonstrate the utility of Goffman's analytical strategy and confirmed that, despite superficial changes in how women's roles were being presented, women continued to be placed in subordinated positions relative to men in print advertisements.

West and Zimmerman argue that Goffman's gender display sets limitations in the analyses of gender construction because Goffman views gender as a "socially scripted dramatization of the culture's idealization of feminine and masculine natures" (West and Zimmerman 1987, 130). Goffman's gender display also fails to grasp the cohesive structures that incorporate behavior and contexts because he mainly focuses on physical gestures and how they are exchanged between men and women.

In coding the television commercials from our sample, we uncovered some of these limitations. For example, we found many instances of women touching themselves, usually their face or hair. This corresponds with Massé and Rosenblum's (1988) finding that 50 per cent of female touching in women's magazine ads were a touching of the self. Many of these examples of self-touching by women were in cosmetic product commercials. However, although there were only a few cases, men also touched their hair in commercials for artificial hair and hair mousse. Thus, with respect to cosmetic products, the issue is not only gender display, but the disproportionate number of commercials for women.

To overcome these and related deficiencies, we employed an inductive strategy for analyzing commercials that is influenced by the theoretical notion that people design their activities to permit others to assess their activities in terms of sex categories

(West and Fenstermaker 1993). One problem with such a technique is that the potential resources for doing gender become enormous. The need to examine relations between all social contexts and activities makes it nearly impossible to define what activities and interactions should be studied as indications of an accomplishment of gender. To minimize this dilemma, we utilize a nested analysis that begins with a quantitative analysis of the characters and the products being advertised.

After identifying noticeable interactional patterns, we conducted an inductive analysis that draws out the subtleties in the relationships between product types and gender accomplishment. Specifically, we contrast the contexts, social interactions and messages surrounding the doing of gender in food and non-food commercials. We chose to compare food and non-food commercials because preparing and serving food for others is considered to be a notable way for women to accomplish their gender. While some men have begun to take some responsibility for family work, cooking activities are not generally perceived in society as a reflection of manliness. Regardless of time, place and social class, it is women who are expected to cook and serve foods (Mennell et al. 1993).

A focus on food is particularly appropriate for studying Japanese television commercials. Richie (1985) points out that Japanese cuisine is conditioned by many codes. All portions are crafted to be bite-sized and foods are arranged to take advantage of contrasts of color, texture, and shape. This not only illustrates the central role of food in Japanese culture, but that elaborate social contexts are created around food preparation and consumption in that country. The central importance of food in Japanese culture is reflected in the fact that the percentage of commercials devoted to food in Japan are significantly greater than in the United States (Sengupta, 1995).

Activities surrounding the preparation, serving and eating of food in both countries clearly is structured by gender, with women doing most of the food preparation in most households (Office of the Prime Minister 1984). Women are expected to take care of cooking and serving high quality food in a way that expresses their concern for others. For example, young Japanese mothers may devote 20 to 45 minutes every morning arranging elaborate boxed lunches (o-bento) for a single pre-school child (Allison 1991). Such devotion represents the dominant normative conception of what it means to be a mother and a woman in Japanese society. The research presented in this paper will assess whether this conceptualization of women is reflected in domestic television commercials and how the construction of

gender may be used to promote the consumption of advertised products.

DATA AND METHODS

The empirical data that are analyzed in this study are taken from a sample of 354 Japanese television commercials. These were drawn, at random, from the three major commercial television networks (Asahi, Fuji and Nihon) between May and July of 1993. Commercials were taken from all times of day to ensure that commercials targeted at different viewing audiences were included in the sample. Commercials produced by local affiliates were not included. While there are undoubtedly biases to the sample, we are convinced that a broad representation of "national" television commercials was captured.

We coded each commercial on a variety of variables. This included the name and type of the product being advertised, the name and type of sponsoring firm, the length of the commercial, the physical settings, the number, sex and approximate age of the characters, and the types of music and singing. We also coded the number of boys, girls, animals, animated characters, and men and women by age groups. The gender of the narrator and the nationality (Japanese or non-Japanese) of the characters were also coded.

The existence of sexual imagery was coded into three categories; nonexistent, weak or strong. A commercial was coded as having weak sexual imagery when there was an apparent aura or atmosphere of attracting the opposite gender was constructed, including cases where only one actor was present. A coding of strong sexual imagery was used for those commercials where direct interactions of a sexual nature were alluded to or took place. One reason for this coding scheme was our interest in testing whether interactions between foreign men and women could be construed as being more "sexual" than encounters between Japanese characters.

Since our analytical approach assumes that the construction of gender varies by social situations, we coded the social contexts presented in each commercial under six categories: family, household, friends, acquaintances, strangers and solitary. The household category included extended families of three or more generations, otherwise the family category was applied. The acquaintance category was used for commercials where people belonging to the same organization or community were presented. Where more than one character interacted in a commercial, but none of the above categories applied, the stranger category was applied. Those commercials where only one character was present, or where characters appeared in

separate scenes, and where no suggestion of social contact with an off-screen character was made, were coded as having a "solitary" context. Another example of a solitary context was a commercial in which only a part of a person's body was shown. If several contexts were used in the same commercial, each context was coded. In a separate variable, we coded the presence or absence of conversation among characters.

In order to analyze the relationship between food and the construction of gender, we coded food commercials by who cooked or prepared, served, and consumed the product. Our objective was to determine if food preparation and serving was gendered differently than consumption. The "message" of each food commercial -- such as convenience, nutrition, price, taste, volume, feeling, promotion, authenticity, quality, reward or freshness -- was also coded.

Based on the findings disclosed by the quantitative approach, we conducted a qualitative analysis of commercials that were representative of the patterns isolated through the quantitative analysis. We studied interactions among advertised products, gender of targeted users, character interaction, and relationships between characters and the audience under specific contexts. Thus, our paper uses quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the normative conceptions of gender that are constructed in Japanese television commercials.

RESULTS

The literature in the sociology of food and gender suggests that women should be more conspicuous than men in food commercials because women have the primary responsibility for preparing and serving meals. However, women were less likely to appear by themselves in the food commercials in our sample (20.5%) than they did in non-food commercials (42.0%)[2], and were found less often by themselves in food commercials than men! Food commercials where women and men appeared together were the most common (47.9%). This finding contradicted our expectations. Further analysis provided an explanation for this surprising result.

Analysis of the data revealed that very few food commercials had food preparation or serving scenes. Only 11 of the 140 food commercials presented any cooking, while serving situations were shown in 19. When cooking was shown, this task was dominated by women, with 8 out of 11 showing women doing the cooking. Serving was more evenly divided with 8 cases of women serving, 8 cases of men, one case of a boy serving and two cases of girls serving.

Food products shown on television commercials tend to be

fast foods. These generally consist of ready-made meals and processed products that require minimal preparation, and are designed to lessen the work burden of women. Presenting scenes where anyone is shown cooking or serving would undermine this image. Instead, these commercials try to convince women that using the product will enable them to discharge their womanly duties with minimal labor. This is particularly true of commercials for processed foods. These commercials often made use of striking color contrasts and Japanese cultural images.

A common activity shown in food commercials is consumption. In those cases where food was consumed, women were more likely (41.2%) to be seen consuming than men (25.8%). In other words, women in food commercials are portrayed as consumers who can relish the product while cooking and serving obligations are minimized. The end result is that food commercials mute gendered work in terms of food preparation, and are probably meant to appeal to women on these grounds. This obscures the fact that in everyday Japanese life it is women who cook and serve foods for family members or others.

To better understand the relationship between the construction of gender and products, we examined the presence of men and women in commercials for products where the number of cases were greater than or equal to ten. In the 20 alcohol commercials in the sample, there was not a single case of only women appearing. In these commercials, it was far more common for women and men to be portrayed together (60%). This is in contrast to the situation in cosmetics commercials, where the norm was for only women to be present (70.6%). There were only a few cases where men appeared by themselves in cosmetics commercials (8%), and no cases of men appearing by themselves in a commercial for home cleaners, including dish or clothes washing detergents[3]. The strategy behind these advertisements is to create a trust relationship with the potential consumer by developing a same-sex connection between the character and the viewer.

These advertisements reflect the conventional orientation in Japanese society towards "proper gender." Women are not supposed to drink alcoholic beverages by themselves or in homosocial settings, even though it is not uncommon for women to drink together in Japan. Correspondingly, men are not to be associated with cosmetics or home cleaners unless they are in the presence of women. The paradoxical finding concerning the distribution of men and women in food commercials is not

attributable to a reversal in normative standards about the role of men in kitchens, but a consequence of the marketing strategy for food products.

As one of our goals was to develop an in-depth analysis of how gender is accomplished in television commercials, we executed an inductive analysis to examine how men and women construct their gender in alcohol and cosmetics commercials. By doing so, we were able to isolate two dominant themes in the alcohol commercials in our sample. Alcohol, particularly beer, is presented as a reward for men who do strenuous physical exertion or finish a hard business assignment, and who have stressful lives. After such activities, men are not merely justified in guzzling a few beers, but are presented as needing to do so in order to relax and be themselves. Since beer commercials are targeted at men, we claim that beer is a man's product in Japan. In addition, Japanese commercials rarely utilize beer within a courtship setting, and when men and women are presented as having an established relationship, women are presented as enjoying the taste of beer.

When a man is shown drinking with a woman, the product is more likely to be hard liquor, and alcohol becomes a tool for maintaining or developing their relationship. If the relationship is important for the man, the man and the woman are more likely to be drinking in a refined setting, such as an authentic country inn. Even when shown drinking beer together, a man and a woman are more likely to be drinking at a restaurant than an outside setting. Scenes of heterosocial drinking in a respectable restaurant are oriented towards women because a man should do his best in helping a woman feel comfortable in a drinking situation. Nonetheless, men are more likely to be the arbiters of taste in these settings. This reaffirms the fact that alcohol is a masculine product.

Cosmetics, on the other hand, are a feminine product. Over 70 percent of all cosmetic commercials present only women. Hair treatments, shampoos, and cold creams are targeted towards women and are consumed in a way that shows women how to "do" their gender. In these commercials, women often speak directly to the camera, as if they were talking to a close, and presumably female, friend to share the secrets of the product.

Cosmetic commercials also emphasize the seriousness of hair and skin care. The message is that proper treatment of hair and skin is an integral element in a woman's efforts to maintain her physical health. The intellectual and innocent figures of women presented in cosmetic commercials demonstrate that maintaining a lovely appearance is a wise and serious activity for women,

and not simply an exercise in maintaining attractiveness for men. On those few occasions when a man appears with a woman in a cosmetic commercial, he is either celebrating the beauty of the woman's appearance or acting as an authority on the product's composition. This is how gender is situationally constructed in this context.

Our inductive analysis also revealed that product message, and the way in which gender is constructed, varied by the gender of the targeted user, even when the product was the same. For example, in toothpaste commercials for women, freshness and effects on dental health are emphasized. For men, efficiency and space savings are highlighted. When the product is targeted at both sexes, the commercial leans towards the approach favored in commercials for men, demonstrating that men's concerns take priority over women's. However, when the message is that the toothpaste offers protection against cavities, women, children or an entire family are featured and women explain the product's attributes. This is because women are responsible for the care of family members' teeth.

We had anticipated that sexual imagery would not be strongly expressed in Japanese television commercials. Some claim that this is because U.S. women are more sexually emancipated than Japanese women (Sengupta 1995), but it is also true that Japanese women and men do not feel comfortable engaging in public expressions of intimacy, even in husband-wife relationships (Suzuki 1986). While flagrant openness in sexual matters is a frequently discussed feature of Japanese society, there are strict societal norms as to when and where such openness may be displayed. In addition, there is a strong preoccupation in Japanese society with "cuteness," particularly among young women (McVeigh 1996), which may contribute to a de-emphasis of assertive sexual posturing in that society. Regardless of the reasons, we can confirm that the vast majority of the commercials we watched had no sexual imagery whatsoever. Even when men and women were shown together, there were few instances of strong sexual imagery, although the possibility of weak sexual imagery does increase when both men and women are present.

We further considered whether the presence of non-Japanese actors would increase the likelihood of sexual imagery. We hypothesized that it would be easier for foreigners to bend the norms against public expression of sexuality. Two commercials for foreign-made hard liquor that use non-Japanese characters were characterized by weak and strong sexual imagery respectively. In one, the whisky product being advertised was referred to by the actors as their "lover," while the other

commercial used brandy as a tool for promoting a heterosexual relationship. However, due to the surprisingly small number of commercials with foreign actors, our hypothesis could not be tested.

As ethnomethodological perspectives would emphasize, social contexts serve as a crucial backdrop for the construction and accomplishment of gender in television commercials. When a social context is established in a commercial, men and women are likely to be present together. This includes family (60.4%), acquaintance (65.3%) and stranger (72.3%) contexts. However, men are more likely than women to be placed with members of the same sex in scenes where the actors portray strangers (19.2% to 8.5%), while women are more likely than men to be seen in solitary settings (60.9% to 39.1%). This was an unexpected finding that lead us to wonder what it was about women that made it more common for producers of advertisements to place them in a solitary setting.

The major explanation appears to be that placing a woman in situations devoid of social context gives her greater license for self-expression. About sixty percent of women appearing in solitary contexts speak directly to the camera. This means that the woman is interacting socially with the viewer. In such a context, a woman is more capable of expressing her intimate feelings. Thus, a woman in an air freshener commercial is shown preparing her room for expected guests while dancing to music and waving a tablecloth in the air. In this way, she expresses her strong, "feminine" emotions through her preparation activities. In another case, a woman puts a magnetic health device on her naked shoulder and shouts "Wow" softly every time she feels a stimulus from the device. Through these shouts, she expresses her feelings of surprise and gratification. These women can openly express their feelings because there are no others present and so they do not have to behave in socially expected ways.

In commercials where women appear in solitary contexts and say nothing, they are more likely to present their "bodies" rather than their emotions. About forty percent of advertisements where one woman appears and no social context was presented fit in this category. One example was of a formally dressed woman with flowers who stands casting a gaze down upon a car in an automobile commercial. In effect, the woman becomes a flower accentuating the attractiveness of the car. In a diet mayonnaise commercial, a woman athlete presents her slim and well-balanced body while performing several gymnastic feats.

Commercials with a solitary context and where only a woman is present are dominated by two themes. If the woman speaks, she is likely to interact with the viewer and to express her

feelings. If she does not, then the woman's presence or body parts are valued as items to be shown on the screen. In contrast, when only a man appears in a commercial, the proportion of those who speak to the camera and those who do not is almost equal. If men do not speak, they end up performing physical actions. They are likely to run, play golf, kick a soccer ball, or explore unknown areas of the world. Although there were two cases of non-Japanese men smiling proudly at the camera, men normally do not pay attention to the camera. Men concentrate on the business at hand as if they did not know they are being filmed. Thus, one message that resonates in Japanese television commercials is that men should do while women should be.

CONCLUSION

The research presented in this paper confirms the advisability of moving beyond the study of sex roles to the investigation of the accomplishment of gender. Our nested approach demonstrates how the structure linking characters, products and social contexts in television commercials constructs gender. A "sex role" approach would only capture the fact that men drink beers with other men and hard liquor with women because it shows the "nouns" of the commercials. An accomplishment of gender perspective shows the "verbs" by shedding light on how men and women do gender by taking into account their activities, as well as the corresponding social contexts. Thus, a man constructs his masculinity by guzzling beer as a reward for hard work, and maintains his masculinity when he is an arbiter of alcoholic products when he drinks with his girlfriend.

Our findings on the way in which gender is done in Japanese television commercials suggests that product sponsors are not challenging, and probably helping to perpetuate, traditional gender differences in Japan. Commercials show viewers that it is "natural" for men to express themselves through physical or professional activities. Having finished these tasks, it is only "normal" that men should feel a need to refresh themselves by guzzling a few beers. Correspondingly, it is "natural" that women should express their feelings, especially in private moments, and that their bodies are objects to be socially appreciated. It is only "normal" that women should feel a need to refresh themselves by taking care of their body parts through the use of various skin and hair care products. The large number of cosmetic commercials for women, and men's dominant presence in alcohol commercials, thus reflect the normative conception of men's and women's "essential natures" (West and Zimmerman 1987) in Japanese society.

Japanese television commercials seek to construct a "natural" expression of gender so that viewers can see how they can "do" gender by consuming the product in question. These commercials conceal the gender inequality that exists in contemporary Japan. What they provide is an image of the good life that can be had by consuming advertized products. Thus, we do not find a "cultural lag" between the reality of gender relations in society and those that are presented in advertisements (Lazier-Smith 1989). As our analysis of food commercials has illustrated, activities related to actual woman's work are simply not presented. By presenting fast foods in a way that insinuates that little work is required for meal preparation, television commercials conceal the unequal gender relations that exist in a society where more women maintain full-time paid employment while they are expected to do most household work. McCracken (1993) refers to this as the two levels of pleasure. In order for women to experience an important pleasure, such as liberation from the food preparation process, they are maneuvered into wanting the pleasure of purchasing an advertised good. Creating such images are invaluable to a capitalistic economy which desires to sell products to people regardless of their gender or their social status. Thus, television commercials express an important contradiction of capitalism -- the need to reflect and take advantage of normative conceptions of gender while simultaneously selling products to people regardless of how they "do" their gender, class or race. One possible future direction for research would be to examine the strategies that advertising agencies develop to overcome such contradictions.

A related contradiction is the way in which Japanese television advertisements create a de-socialized view of reality. In particular, we were struck by our discovery that in television commercials, food is generally consumed by individuals, and not by families or other social groups at a mealtime. In other words, although Japanese television food commercials clearly take advantage of the social reality that women are primarily responsible for the work surrounding food purchasing and meal preparation, and that food consumption is frequently a socially constructed activity, commercials present a superficial view of the food preparation and consumption process. Indeed, we found that all of the television commercials not only standardize, exaggerate, and simplify gender (Goffman, 1976), but also obscure gender inequality by presenting a de-socialized world that is filled with "fantastic products." This was true regardless of whether the product was targeted at men or women.

Finally, our analysis also demonstrates some of the distinctive aspects of Japanese commercials that are associated with local cultural requirements. The fact that sexual imagery was absent from the large majority of the advertisements we analyzed is a strong indication that Japanese television commercials do mirror the indigenous culture in key attributes. Indeed, this reinforces our interpretation that commercial advertisements exploit as well as reinforce, dominant social norms. Our ability to generate these findings, in turn, substantiate the power of nested approaches to the study of gender not only in television advertisements, but in other forms of cultural expression as well.

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ENDNOTES*****

[1]. Based on our search of the academic literature, there appear to be few studies of gender portrayals in television advertisements in Asian countries, particularly outside of Japan. We note that one of the traditional interests in communications research in many Asian countries has been the role that modern communication systems might play in the development process (Amunugama 1982).

[2]. Due to space limitations, tabular results of the bi-variate analyses are not presented. These may be obtained by contacting the authors.

[3]. In Sengupta's study (1995), alcoholic beverage, personal and beauty care product, and household cleanser commercials comprised 7.5 percent, 25 percent, and 0.9 percent respectively of the U.S. sample, where the total number of the commercials was 227. Unfortunately, Sengupta's analysis of gender portrayals was limited to the sex role approach.

This research reported on this article was supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture under agreement number 88-33574-4054, and by the Faculty of Economics at Kanazawa University, Japan. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of either of these institutions. The authors would also like to express their gratitude to Valerie Jenness for her helpful comments on a previous version of this manuscript.