

## Consuming Orientalism: Images of Asian/American Women in Multicultural Advertising

Minjeong Kim and Angie Y. Chung

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*Past research has analyzed the gendered constructs of American consumption practices that underlie marketed images in the print media. This article reconsiders the cultural constructs of multicultural advertisement strategies in the new global era. Based on an analysis of three advertisement campaigns, our contention is that the normalcy and positionality of White males in the U.S. society rely on the racialized and gendered representations of Asian/American women as the "Other." It is argued that the emerging global culture has been packaged, commodified and marketed by multi-national corporations in a manner that widens their range of cultural repertoires but resurrects traditional hierarchies of American Orientalism.*

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Research studies have long challenged the ways in which advertising and marketing campaigns employ gendered imagery that objectify women and reinforce power differences between the sexes in order to sell their products (Berger 1977; Betterton 1987; Bordo 1993; Cortese 1999; Goffman 1979; Kilbourn 1999, 2000; Manca and Manca 1994; Williamson 1978, 1986). Among other things, print advertising has been shown to promote images that distort women's bodies for male pleasure, condone violence against women, or belittle the women's movement itself as a playful prank. From a historical perspective, however, women of color rarely figured into the marketing campaigns of these companies—partly because of their small numbers as well as their racialized invisibility to mainstream American society. As a result, aside from research on racial stereotypes in the TV and movie entertainment industries (Gee 1988; Hamamoto 1994; Lee 1999), few

Correspondence should be directed to Minjeong Kim (e-mail: mk5155@albany.edu) or Angie Chung (e-mail: aychung@albany.edu), Department of Sociology, University of Albany, Arts and Sciences 351, 1400 Washington Ave., Albany, NY 12222.

scholars have fully examined the commodified images of Asian/American women<sup>1</sup> that have come to play an integral role in today's consumer culture industries.

Recent trends in the global economy have transformed the cultural content and marketing strategies of corporate advertising campaigns today as we demonstrate in this study. In particular, these advertising campaigns have sought to diversify their cultural repertoire through the greater inclusion of Asian and Latino/American characters and the invocation of global imageries. However, we will argue that representations of ethnic minority groups in such advertising campaigns are usually based on gendered and racialized reflections of global culture that draw on resurrected themes of colonialism and American Orientalism. This particularly holds true in their depictions of Asian/American women (and the implicit absence or rarity of Asian/American men). On the one hand, it is important to note that images of Asian/American women in advertising are not ahistorical in origin. Oftentimes, they selectively emulate and modify popular images of Asian/American women in the U.S. culture that have been shaped throughout American history. At the same time, this study aims to show how such representations also emerge from the specific "multicultural" and globalized context of post-Civil Rights America that have destabilized and transformed the identities of White males.

This paper will discuss the dynamics of American Orientalism in advertising and its role in reconstructing Asian/American women in relation to White Americans within the globalizing multicultural context of U.S. society. First, it will provide a theoretical context for understanding gendered and racial representations of women in the print media in post-industrial American society. Second, we will show how stereotypical imageries of Asian/American women and commodified Orientalism have evolved in American media culture over time. Third, we will analyze advertisements taken from various magazines that have included Asian/American female characters with specific focus on three multicultural advertising campaigns. In this section, we will show how the marketing of Orientalist images and meanings take shape under the guise of multiculturalism with more detailed explanations of specific race/gender imagery. Based on this analysis, the paper will conclude by showing how Orientalist ideologies have been rearticulated within the context of today's globalized economy.

## CONSUMING CULTURE IN POST-INDUSTRIAL AMERICA

Much of scholarly attention has focused on the construction of corporate marketing and advertising campaigns through a gendered lens (Cortese 1999;

<sup>1</sup>As Palumbo-Liu explains, the inclusion of the slash in the word "Asian/American" conveys the same meaning as in the construction "and/or." That is, it represents "a choice between two terms, their simultaneous and equal status, and an element of indecidability, that is, as it at once implies both exclusion and inclusion (Palumbo-Liu 1999:1)." This element of "indecidability" is an important factor in this word choice, because Asian Americans are still considered to be "foreigners," or Asians. In this paper, we use "Asian American" only for specific situations related to Asian Americans.

Kilbourn 1990, 2000; Manca and Manca 1994; Williamson 1978, 1986), yet most studies oddly leave out an important racial and nativist element of today's global capitalist culture that feeds on the visual consumption of women's bodies. The early representations of America's consumption culture relied heavily on images of middle-class White women whose idealistic roles were defined within the context of the modern domestic economy. However, the current era has witnessed profound cultural and structural changes that have substantially transformed the dynamics of cultural subjugation for women of color in America as reflected in the marketing of global cultures. In particular, the literature shows how this new global culture markets itself on the visual consumption of the bodies of women of color.

As studies have shown, the historical rise and development of the American consumption culture has been in many ways inextricable from societal conceptualizations of gender and domesticity (Friedan 1983; Peiss 1998; Zelizer 1994). The modern roots of gender-based consumerism may be traced back to the incorporation of women into the American work force after World War II and the advent of technological innovations that "freed" women from the drudgeries of manual labor in the home. Although women who could afford such luxuries found that they had more time on their hands, this sense of freedom was curbed by their dual labor at home and in the workplace, as well as their shifting roles in the home front. As opposed to diminishing their household responsibilities, middle-class women began to assume new domestic roles focused not so much on the time-consuming and physical elements of household chores, but more so on their ability to manage various household activities, including consumer-oriented tasks like shopping and household financial management (Friedan 1983; Zelizer 1994).

Thus, not surprisingly, the early manifestations of this American consumption culture drew heavily on middle-class women's expected roles as homemaker and family caretaker, further reaffirming the divide between the female sphere of domesticity and the male domain of work and politics. Various studies have shown the ways in which advertisements during this period profited off of such cultural imageries (Friedan 1983; Peiss 1998; Williamson 1978). In the much-heralded book *The Feminine Mystique* (1983), Friedan shows how corporate advertisements helped to promote household products by re-centering and glamorizing the modern woman's role as homemaker around the purchase of product X. She states, "Properly manipulated, . . . American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack—by the buying of things" (p. 208). Women have been particularly targeted by corporate advertisers, because of their primary roles as purchasing agents for their families (Peiss 1998).

Despite its chauvinistic undertones, these cultural temptations were portrayed as a means for women to gain a sense of individual achievement, status and respect from their family, friends and neighbors through the beautification of self, the family and the home. Shopping itself became an activity that would offer "ladies"

a respectable way to spend their leisure time and help to emancipate them from the physical restrictions of the domestic sphere (Bowlby 1985; Oh and Arditi 2000). Yet while targeting the female audience in some sense, the imagery of women as good homemaker and consumer, of women as sexual objects of heterosexual male desires, and of women as embodiments of leisure and femininity clearly catered to the tastes and interests of their heterosexual male constituents (Friedan 1983; Williamson 1978).

Gendered images within marketing have since evolved with women becoming targeted not only as the household manager of family activities but also, the specialized target of this ever-expanding culture. Although scholars remind us that the roots of luxury consumption pre-date even capitalism itself, it was not until the advent of post-industrial capitalism that these activities became more than the mere “purchase of goods but an entire way of life” (Peiss 1998). These shifting gender roles in many ways reflect broader structural transformations in the American economy “from concentration on the manufacture of goods under the management of the nineteenth-century captains of industry to the manufacture of minds disposed to buy them” (Bowlby 1985, p. 18). That is, corporations in the post-industrial economy have expanded beyond the industrial production of manufactured goods to profit-making marketing strategies that take advantage of the ever-expanding base of professional consumers who operate the global economy and the consumer market with it. Credit cards, shopping malls and internet consumer services help to support the new consumption habits of the general public (Gottdiener 2000; Oh and Arditi 2000). Furthermore, recent innovations in media technology and the mass production of goods have enabled large-scale multinational corporations to market their products beyond a minority elite to a broader base of consumers, allowing them to monopolize specific shares of the market (Gottdiener 2000; Zukin 1991).

One of the effective ways of marketing the distinctiveness of a product is by highlighting its differential appeal to men and women—that is, by distinguishing between the inherent “masculine” and “feminine” nature of specific brand-name products (Williamson 1978). By generating tastes for brand-name products and employing various advertising and marketing strategies, corporations essentially *cultivate* a culture of consumption that thrives on the image of the product based on some artificially-created “need,” more so than the actual utility of the product itself. Corporations “create structures of meaning” (Williamson 1978) around objects that have no inherent value or meaning, thus shaping the interpersonal relationships that arise from within it. More importantly, scholars argue that the acquisition of specific brand-name commodities confers status and even a sense of self to individuals in the new cultural economy (Gottdiener 2000). Within this context, corporations have produced a dizzying array of gender-specific products that help to increase their profits—from specialized women’s magazines to deodorants “for ladies only.”

Although corporations have expanded their marketing to female consumers, the promotion of many of these products continues to rely heavily on traditional gendered images and ideologies. These gendered marketing strategies have also been used to lure women and youth to cigarettes and alcohol (Kilbourne 1999). Even though women have come to play more important professional and managerial roles in the modern economy, the dominant imagery of the feminine consumer has proven to be more difficult to overcome in the male-dominated corporate world, not to mention the broader consumption culture which it has created (Peiss 1998).

Although many studies have examined the gendered dimensions of this consumption culture, there has been a noticeable lack of research that analyzes today's capitalist culture through the intersections of race, gender and nativity. Various trends in the current post-industrial global economy have underscored not only the consumptive aspects of traditional gender roles, but also the exploitative international machinery upon which this consumption economy is built. The high standards of living that sustain the growing white-collar sector of the American economy are made possible by the employment and exploitation of cheap immigrant labor, particularly women and children from Asia and Latin America. As more and more white-collar workers are integrated into the expanding highly-skilled and professional labor force, there has been a growing need for immigrant labor to take their place in the home as nannies, housekeepers, lawnmowers and even shopping consumers (Chang and Abramovitz 2000; Hothschild and Ehrenreich 2003; Sassen-Koob 1984). At the same time, the steady growth of low-skilled immigrant workers has also been accompanied by an influx of highly-skilled workers and professionals, particularly from Asia—a pattern that marks the polarized nature of the global economy.

But even beyond the realm of professional service, the mainstream cultural economy as a whole has come to rely increasingly on the cheap labor of immigrants in order to sustain its mass production of cheap goods in large-scale industries like Walmart, Gap, and Nike. Immigrant women from Third World countries have figured greatly into the new economic structure, because of their cheaper labor and greater vulnerability to subcontractors who must drive down labor costs in order to maintain their competitive relations with large-scale corporations. The greater flexibility of production in the new era of technology has allowed corporations to export these jobs as well to Third World countries where such workers are abundant and labor regulation laws are poor. Innovative research by Sassen (Sassen-Koob 1984) and other scholars have shown how the feminization of cheap Third World wage labor and the related rise in female immigration to the U.S. have acted as integral cogs in the corporate machinery of post-industrial capitalism. In this manner, the cultural and structural foundations of today's cultural economy still feed on the colonization of the "Other." The gendered impact of the globalized economy is best exemplified by the coinciding expansion of the Asian sex industry,

which has opened its doors to businessmen traveling to Asia (Hochschild and Ehrenreich 2003; Jeffreys 1999).

The rising significance of immigration from Asia and Latin America and America's role in the new global economy will inevitably have an effect on the multicultural representations that advertising and marketing campaigns will promote, particularly among their white-collar, professional audience. Multiculturalism is one of the clever marketing strategies that corporations have recently used to market their products. "Multiculturalism" evokes artificial images of racial unity and harmony among the various cultural groups of America and celebrates the general openness of "color-blind" Americans to the rich cultural traditions of different racial groups. The multicultural approach allows corporations to achieve two things: While allowing them to expand their market share to a racially diversifying population of consumers, corporations have also used the visual consumption of women's bodies—and the bodies of women of color in particular—to re-package and obscure the exploitative labor machinery that produces them.

Sharon Zukin's book, *Landscapes of Power* (1991), offers a powerful testament to the ways in which the imagery of multicultural unity can re-invent and conceal deeper structural inequities that produce post-industrial landscapes of mass consumption. From commodities displayed in shopping malls to the architectural splendors that re-organize urban/suburban spaces, large-scale multi-national corporations have invaded the collective memories and structured them around "liminal" imageries of place. Zukin argues that this collision between abstract reality and material consumption extracts superficial representations of diversity embedded in the standardization and internationalization of material production and packages them in a way that mimics authenticity and distinction. In so doing, this commodified landscape conceals the exploitative systems of production that fuel mass consumption and replaces them with superficial images of diversity and global unity based on colonialist and feudal systems of production (Williamson 1986; Zukin 1991).

However, the various manifestations of this new consumption culture represent more than just the hegemonic forces of capitalism. Analysis of this post-industrial global culture must also take into account the historical and cultural context within which this system has taken shape in America. The fantastic imagery of a happy, multicultural society has been a key step for Americans who not too long ago eliminated the last remnants of legalized segregation and discrimination during the 1960s Civil Right era. The series of politically tumultuous struggles that led to its ultimate demise left a deep impression on the White American psyche by calling into question its strong belief in the meritocracy and humanity of American democracy and highlighting the ambiguity of its own identity in an era that rallied cultural pride and self-empowerment for non-White groups. One way that White Americans have established a cultural passageway for themselves has

been by laying claim to the birth of this new multicultural world and by establishing their role within it. As best exemplified by the commodification of African American hip-hop, corporations are able to disassociate everyday Americans from the structural context of oppression and the historical context of struggle that define the post-industrial world by laying claim to the bodies and cultures of the “Other” (Giroux 1994; Rose 1994). The cultural landscapes of post-Civil Rights White America in many ways depend largely on this vision of the American melting pot—a trend that has sustained recent political backlash against “anti-color-blind” policies such as affirmative action (Omi 1991).

Within this context, the article examines the cultural representations of corporate marketing campaigns within the contemporary global era with specific attention to their hegemonic outlooks on race, nativity and gender. The article will argue how the multicultural imagery of specific advertising campaigns, while expanding its campaign to include multi-racial characters, relies on the “foreign” and “seductive” appeal of Asian/American women in order to highlight the supremacy and positionality of White men within the global order. As the next section will show, many of the earlier themes of commodified orientalism are replicated in contemporary depictions of Asian/American women; at the same time, our analysis of corporate campaigns will show how they have now been re-contextualized within the multicultural, global setting of post-industrial American culture.

## THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN ORIENTALISM

Discursive images of American Orientalism have been profoundly shaped by the historical context of race relations in the domestic homefront, as well as the nation’s diplomatic relations with Asian countries abroad (Gee 1988; Lee 1999, pp. 8–9). In his influential book, *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said argues that “the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority” (1979, p. 42). Westerners’ knowledge about the East imagines the Orient in a way that polarizes the Orient from the Occident and places the Occident higher than the Orient in the world hierarchy. The West is depicted as developed, powerful, articulate, and superior, while the East is seen as undeveloped, weak, mysterious, and inferior. Although Said focuses mainly on Europe’s relations with the Middle East and South Asia, the political ideologies and cultural imageries implicit in such hegemonic dichotomies help to shed light on the internal dynamics of Orientalism in America. Specifically, American Orientalism has been sustained by this notion of Western/White power as a means to justify and exert its cultural domination over Asia and Asian America.

While European Orientalism was purported to justify the colonization and domination of Third World people, early American Orientalism was first invented to exclude Asian immigrants from entering or making a home on American soil. To

this end, the mass media began its long history of cultivating insidious stereotypes of Asian/Americans for the visual consumption of the White American public—everything from the aggressive, ominous images of Japanese and Chinese immigrants during the “yellow peril” to more modern depictions of Asian/Americans as the passive “model minority” (Espiritu 1997; Hamamoto 1994; Lee 1999; Moy 1993; Taylor and Stern 1997). In all these stereotypes, the assimilability of Asian/Americans has always been at question (Palumbo-Liu 1999; Yu 2001). Robert G. Lee’s book, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (1999), shows how Orientalist images during the Gold Rush era depicted Asian/Americans as “pollutants” in the free land of California and Chinese immigrant workers as potential threats to the stability of the White immigrant working class. In movies like *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) and Fu Manchu films, the image of emasculated, asexual Asians co-existed with the image of Orientals as licentious beasts that threatened to undermine the economic and moral stability of the U.S. nation and the American family. Such cultural representations help set the ideological backdrop for anti-Chinese fervor, which led to the outbreak of anti-Chinese rioting and the implementation of the first Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

Within this context, it is important to note that the practice of “consuming Orientalism” evolved long before the advent of the post-industrial era. Even in the early twentieth century, Americans supported Orientalism in their day-to-day purchasing and consumption practices. Advertising cards for various products like soaps, dentifrice, waterproof collars and cuffs, clothes wringers, threads, glycerin, hats, and tobacco drew on Sino-phobic themes, such as Chinese queues, porcelain doll-like Chinese women, and hyper-feminized Asian men, to market the distinctive appeal of their products (see Chan [http://www.chsa.org/features/ching/ching\\_conf.htm](http://www.chsa.org/features/ching/ching_conf.htm)). These cultural representations reinforced White America’s moral and masculine superiority over the foreign elements of the East and allowed them to lay both physical and sexual claim to the bodies of Orientals at home and abroad.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the concept of Oriental inassimilability began to give way to the assimilation-oriented Model Minority myth—that is, the belief that Asian/Americans have achieved the American Dream through hard work and passive obedience. After World War II and the Korean War, movies like *Flower Drum Song* (1961) evolved their plots around less threatening, passive versions of Asian/American characters who happily shed their backwards ancestral culture in order to embrace the American lifestyle. However, as Gina Marchetti argues, “Hollywood used Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders as signifiers of racial otherness to avoid the far more immediate racial tensions between blacks and whites or the ambivalent mixture of guilt and enduring hatred toward Native American and Hispanics” (1993, p. 6). For one, the media’s obsession with the model minority arose within the political context of the Civil Rights era (Lee 1999; Suzuki 1989). Images of effeminate Asian men and submissive Asian women were



used to counter images of violent and vociferous African Americans and feminists and to demonstrate that familial stability, social mobility, and ethnic assimilation could be achieved without militant social activism. Thus, the Asian American model minority became the symbolic antithesis of militant Civil Rights activists and feminist groups.

Nonetheless, focus on the assimilability of Asian Americans as “honorary whites” did not exempt them from the whims of racial antagonism and continued to co-exist with the image of Asian Americans as “forever foreigners” (Tuan 1998). For instance, America’s bitter experiences during the prolonged Vietnam War simultaneously revived cultural images of Asians as villains and “gooks.” Countless war movies repeatedly invoked images of the faceless, merciless and destructive Viet Cong instigating unmentionable travesties against brave, White U.S. soldiers. In the 1970s and 1980s, American society, once again threatened by surging economic development in Japan, projected its fears through the cultural resurrection of sinister Fu Manchu-like villains in movies such as *Blade Runner* (1982) or *Rising Sun* (1993). The massive influx of Asian immigrants in the post-1965 era has only helped to sustain the identification of Asian/Americans with mystical beings from the Orient. Compared to African Americans whose activists had been vigilant enough to protest racist movies like *Birth of the Nation* (1915), Asian/Americans were considered to be politically acquiescent and indifferent to misrepresentations in popular culture—a view that seemed to justify Hollywood’s all-too-familiar messages of anti-miscegenation and White superiority.

Throughout the evolution of American Orientalism, the notion of the Orient as the culturally-inferior Other has also converged with the concept of women as the gender-inferior Other. Orientalist romanticism in the West synchronized White men’s heterosexual desire for (Oriental) women and for Eastern territories through the feminization of the Orient (Kang 1993; Lowe 1991). American Orientalism in many ways depended on the masculine, superior image of White men juxtaposed with the emasculation of Asian/American men. By portraying Asian/American men as sexually excessive or asexually feminine, such cultural themes reaffirmed Orientals’ deviance from “normal” heterosexual gender norms implicit in White middle-class families (Espiritu 1997; Lee 1999).

Aside from projecting stereotypes associated with the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook, cultural representations of Asian/American women in the media have played on specific characteristics that derive from their peculiar status at the crossroads of race and gender (Degabriele 1996; Espiritu 1997; Gee 1988; Hagedorn 1994; Kang 1993; Lee 1996; Lu 1997; Marchetti 1993; Tajima 1989). Typical representations of Asian/American women have been embodied in what Renee E. Tajima calls, “the Lotus Blossom Baby (e.g. China Doll, Geisha Girl, and the shy Polynesian beauty), and the Dragon Lady (e.g. prostitutes and devious madams)” (1989, p. 309). Although distinctive in many ways, both images have served to stimulate the sexual voyeurism of White American males and the

objectification of foreign, exotic Oriental women as their rightful property. As an example of this, the most prevailing image of Asian/American women in movies like *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) fixated on their shameless sexual desire, their aggressive and manipulative traits, and their inability to resist White men. The storylines of more contemporary movies such as *Year of the Dragon* (1985), and *Heaven and Earth* (1993) continue to focus on Asian/American female characters who are betrayed or exploited by men of their own race but are later saved by White male heroes. Thus, Orientalism in all its guises has been an underlying feature of American culture.

### ADVERTISING MULTICULTURALISM

Historically, Asian Americans were never targeted as a significant consumer base for many of these marketing campaigns. However, as ethnic minorities grew in numbers throughout the 1980s and 1990s, marketers and advertisers began to rapidly acknowledge their potential impact as consumers (Cortese 1999; Cui 1997; Reese 1997). As one of the fastest-growing racial groups in the United States, Asian Americans have offered a very attractive market to advertisers because of their high levels of income and education. Furthermore, the steady global expansion of corporate branches into modernizing economies in Asia and Latin America and the growing sector of Asian professionals within the U.S. and abroad have also increased the need to re-conceptualize advertisement campaigns in a multicultural fashion (Ong, Bonacich and Cheng 1994). As a result, ethnic-based marketing strategies have become an indispensable terminology in the area of marketing (Cortese 1999; Cui 1997).

Two decades after the Civil Rights movements, companies and advertisers began to integrate minority consumers into their main marketing strategies (Cui 1997, p. 123) and initiated what Anthony Cortese calls the “copycat ad”—that is, traditional advertisements reproduced with models of different races. However, the copycat ad was perceived to be problematic because it assumed that “African Americans and Latinos are simply dark-skinned white people” (Cortese 1999, p. 96) and ignored the specific consumer needs and ethnic identities of their target population. In response, companies introduced a new style of marketing focused on promoting a corporate brand of multiculturalism.

Some pundits argue that multicultural marketing is more sensitive to the needs of minority consumers and helps to update or abandon traditional stereotypical representations of these populations (Cui 1997, p. 124). However, this study will demonstrate how such campaigns merely re-package long-standing racial stereotypes in their efforts to promote multicultural, globalized settings. Although old advertising cards were explicitly meant to appeal to the native-born White American population, our argument is that contemporary advertising campaigns have tried to re-invent the world in all its multicultural glories without threatening

culturally-embedded hierarchies of the past. Images of Asian/Americans in multicultural ad series often employ traditional themes of American Orientalism with a new global twist. In the words of Williamson, “capitalism’s constant search for new areas to colonize” (Williamson 1986, p. 116) has permeated the realms of advertisement in terms of the way they portray social movements, feminism, the gay and lesbian movement (Cagan 1978; Clark 1995; Cortese 1999), and now multiculturalism. Under the guise of multiculturalism, Orientalism has evolved into an object to consume and a vehicle to stimulate consumption. Examples of this include recent trends in Asian meditation and spa products and youth-oriented clothing lines that have incorporated “Oriental” paraphernalia like dragons and happy Buddhas into their apparel.

To this end, the research highlights three advertising campaigns that were chosen from six different magazines, including *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, *Vogue*, *In Style*, *Premiere*, and *Entertainment Weekly*.<sup>2</sup> We looked at all issues from these six magazines from September 1999 to December 2000. There were noticeable changes in all magazines in terms of the number of ads showcasing Asian/American models. For example, a previous study (Taylor, Lee, and Stern 1995) done on minority representation in randomly selected issues of *Newsweek* found that Asian/Americans appeared only 7 times out of a possible 224 ads with models (3%) from September 1992 through August 1993. In contrast, our count of Asian/American models in the same magazine from September 1999 to August 2000 found a total of 49 Asian/American appearances out of a possible 698 ads with models (7%)—21 of which featured Asian/Americans in leading roles (as opposed to background characters).

Notably, Asian/American males make rare appearances in magazine advertisements we have examined as compared with their female counterparts, which intimates to the racial and gender dynamics of advertisement cultures. And this is not an unprecedented trend. Following the popularity of Connie Chung, Asian American women anchorpersons have been very visible, whereas Asian American men anchors are nearly completely absent (Espiritu 1997). This gender imbalance not only sustain the construction of Asian American women as more desirable candidates to be assimilated when paired with White men but also reinforces the “ownership” of White American males over the bodies and spirits of Asian/American women by negating the potential physical and sexual threat imposed by Asian/American men. This point will be emphasized later.

<sup>2</sup>Magazines were chosen based on two conditions—to cover different types of magazines (Taylor, Lee, and Stern 1995) and accessibility. They include general interest magazine (*Newsweek*), business press (*Business Week*), women’s magazines (*Vogue* and *In Style*), and entertainment magazines (*Premiere* and *Entertainment Weekly*); and, the first author subscribed to four magazines out of six. *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, and *Vogue* were used in the previous research. According to Ulrich’s International Periodical Directories ([www.ulrichsweb.com](http://www.ulrichsweb.com)), the numbers of paid circulations are 3.1 million (*Newsweek*), 1.2 million (*Business Week*), 1.3 million (*Vogue*), 1.1 million (*In Style*), 1.5 million (*Entertainment Weekly*) and 0.6 million (*Premier*).

Our purview of advertisements in the selected magazines also reveals a diversity of targeted Asian/American consumers—from lower to middle-range customers who shop at *Target* to high-class clientele at *Neiman Marcus*, but significantly, a new interest in marketing campaigns has been their attention to white-collar professional clientele, mainly businessmen. For instance, out of the 51 companies that advertised in these widely-read magazines, 8 were prestigious insurance/financial management corporations (e.g. Morgan Stanley Dean Witter), 4 were hotel/travel-related industries (e.g. Hilton, Northwest Airlines), and 5 were high-end designer brands (e.g. Dolce and Gabbana)—all of which cater to higher-income yuppie or professional consumers. This deliberate attention to the consumption patterns of white-collar professionals stems from Asian Americans' rising purchasing power of this rapidly expanding occupational sector in today's post-industrial economy.

Although these corporations are targeting a multi-racial consumer base, the perspectives of these marketing campaigns implicitly preserve the centrality of White men by re-packaging Orientalist themes of Asian/American women under the guise of multiculturalism. Illustration 1 gives an example of a multicultural ad by Charles Schwab (featured in *Newsweek* and *Business Week*) that contextualizes these emerging themes of globalization, enterprise and professionalism through the incorporation of Asian/American models. The ad shows three people sitting on a bench, each holding a book with a title relevant to each person. The White woman to the left is holding a book, "Keep Ahead of the Sharks," the Asian American woman sitting next to her is holding a book "How to Get Rich Overnight," and the White man sitting next to her is holding a book "How to Get Rich Overnight."

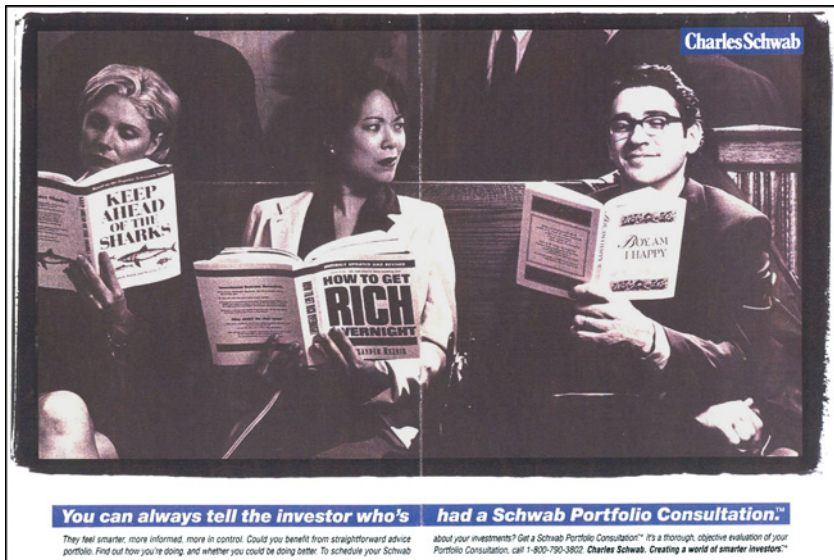


Illustration 1. Multicultural advertisement by Charles Schwab.

the White man is holding a book titled “Boy, Am I Happy.” The main character is the White man with the blissful look. The advertisement conveys the message that you, the consumer, can be just as happy as this man with help from the consultation company, Charles Schwab.

More interestingly, the White woman is fixated on the book she is reading, but in stark contrast, the Asian American woman is glaring at the White man askance with feelings of resentful anger and jealousy because of his happiness and financial success—a theme that draws on the image of Asia as an economic adversary of the United States (Espiritu 1997; Lee 1999; Suzuki 1989). But also, the unusually large lettering of the word “RICH” on her book highlights her obsession with making money and reaffirm the cultural perception of Asian/Americans as greedy money-mongers and threats to the overall well-being of real (White) “Americans.”

The ad’s portrayal of the Asian/American woman revolves around the con-ning and hostile nature of her role in the global market and more importantly, takes shape *in relation to* her White female and White male counterparts. While these ads speak to a racially-diverse audience of professionals, it is important to note the ways in which relationality is a key component in Orientalism and that multiculturalism arises within the context of White males within this global market. Importantly, this image that evokes that of the “Dragon Lady,” the epithet for belligerent, cunning, and untrustworthy Asian/American women, is placed to represent this societal locality of Asian Americans. Hence, the new wave of advertisement campaigns underscores some of the inherent contradictions of multiculturalism itself: while opening its doors to the new Asian consumer, it does so by representing them within traditional White patriarchal frameworks of Orientalism.

The following three corporate campaigns were mainly selected because they are part of a larger multicultural ad series, as opposed to a single-themed advertisement frame. In the last couple of years, the multicultural ad *series* has become a popular way of marketing brand-name products with a racially diverse cast. The multicultural ad series is an advertisement campaign that features each model in various ad copies, poses, or appearances within a series of thematic frames. The frames are either featured all at the same time or in isolation from one another in different magazines. The multicultural ad series tries to include diverse racial groups and have thus generated an increase in Asian/American representations in advertising. They are particularly interesting to our research, because they allow us not only to analyze the cultural undertones of an individual ad but also, compare the thematic representations that come out of each racial/gender frame.

**Virginia Slims** (Featured in *Business Week*, *Vogue*, *In Style*, *Premiere* and *Entertainment Weekly*)

The first series of multicultural advertisements comes from the “Find Your Voice” campaign by Virginia Slims, which depicts different images of women from diverse racial backgrounds expressing ways to “find your voice” in life.

Virginia Slims is a brand of cigarettes produced by Philip Morris, the third largest cigarette company (2.4% in 2003) in retail share performance, which specifically targets a racially-diverse audience of female consumers. Established in 1968, Virginia Slims first played on themes of female empowerment through campaign slogans like “You’ve Come a Long Way Baby,” which elicited angry responses from various feminist organizations because of the way it distorted and trivialized feminist issues in order to profit on women’s addictions (Cagan 1978; Kilbourn 2000). Following the multicultural marketing trends of the time, Virginia Slims then introduced a new advertisement series in 1999–2000 called the “Find Your Voice” campaign, which again promoted themes of female liberation but this time with attention to a broader multicultural and global consumer base. As one feminist newsletter proclaims, the Virginia Slims campaign now equated smoking their cigarettes with the liberating influence of Western culture through advertisements targeting vulnerable Third World populations (Batchelor 2003). *Ms.* magazine also expressed its indignation to the company’s efforts to “globalize addiction and equalize smoking-related illnesses” through multicultural campaigns like these (Comments Please 2000, p. 96).

Illustration 2 provides a glimpse at four different ads from this campaign, each featuring models of different races. The first photo shoot shows a blonde-haired White woman next to the words “I look temptation right in the eye and then make my own decisions”; an African woman proclaiming “No single institution owns the copyright for BEAUTY”; a Latino woman stating “Dance around naked with a rose between your teeth if you want . . . but do it like you mean it”; and finally an Asian woman with the words “My voice reveals the hidden power within.” In another ad, the same Asian woman is juxtaposed next to the words “In silence I see. With WISDOM, I speak.”

Focusing on the Asian model, we can see blatant references to time-old themes of Oriental feminine exoticism perpetuated by numerous Hollywood films (e.g., *Sayonara* (1957), *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) and *Japanese War Bride* (1952)) as well as western literature (e.g., *Memoir of the Geisha* (1999)) and musicals (e.g., *Madam Butterfly*) in the past century. Stepping away from the feminist undertones of Virginia Slim campaigns, the posture of the Asian woman in two different ads is one of femininity and sexual invitation. She is looking down and sideways, and her head is tilted as well, with a cryptic smile. Her hands are curled in front of her in an “Oriental-like” gesture as if she is dancing. She appears as an entertainer, a *Madam Butterfly*, a courtesan, a geisha, and “a Lotus Blossom baby.” Historically, Lotus Blossom images represented Asian women as exotic, enticing, subservient, pampering, self-effacing, self-sacrificing and sensual. In a similar manner as this ad, Asian women in Lotus Blossom images throw sexually suggestive smiles and gazes but hesitate to speak. Renee E. Tajima states “Asian women . . . are interchangeable in appearance and name, and are joined together by the common language of non-language—that is, uninterpretable chattering, pidgin



Illustration 2. The “Find Your Voice” campaign by Virginia Slims.

English, giggling, or silence” (1989, p. 309). References to “Hidden power” and “In silence I see” again reaffirm the “non-language” embodiment of Asian women. Furthermore, although the ads make no explicit references to men, it is important to note that Lotus Blossom images were traditionally used to obliterate Asian women’s subjectivity by validating their role as the objects of White men’s sexual fantasy.

What is more interesting about this ad series is the way the “exotic,” “feminine” and “mysterious” allure of the Orientalized character becomes accentuated by the projected normalcy of the White characters. The ads that feature women of color consistently promote the strongest cultural references in the series: an African woman in a colorful headdress,<sup>3</sup> a dancing Latino woman in a light cotton weave and wooden beads, an Asian woman in heavy makeup and traditional Chinese dress. In the case of the Asian woman, this aura of foreignness is highlighted by the antediluvian attire and posture. The Asian woman in both ads is wearing dresses and makeup that are modified renditions of traditional Chinese dresses and hairdos that are no longer worn today. This theme derives from Orientalist depictions of Asia—that is, the unchangeable and undeveloped portrayal of a colonized Orient (Said 1979; Nochlin 1989). Furthermore, this particular series invokes feminine and hyper-sexualized stereotypes of Asian women (as well as Latino women) in stark contrast to the themes of liberation and empowerment associated with the White and African American characters.

At the same time, the Westernized version of Orientalism reified by the ad serves to commodify Asian culture. Westerners’ indulgence in Asian culture has been often understood as a signifier of their wealth and the broadened purview of their ability to consume (Marchetti 1993, p. 27). The consumption of Asian culture has never required an accurate comprehension of Asian cultures and histories and empathy with Third World experiences of colonialism, imperialism, and economic exploitation. In the ad, the costume of the Asian woman looks Chinese but it is in actuality pseudo-authentic at best. Her hairdo is not done in a traditional Chinese style and her makeup is modern not traditional in fashion. Furthermore, her posture is pan-Asian, drawing on gestures, expressions and stances that stem from various Asian cultures. One of the ads (not shown here) even features messages written in Chinese that make no sense in interpretation. Despite the corporation’s attempts to address a multicultural audience, the cultural references in the ads end up perpetuating Orientalist meanings that reaffirm the dominant status of White Americans. The Orientalist depiction of Chinese customs and written characters were there not to be understood but to be objectified by viewers in their visual consumption of the Asian female model. The ad provided neither identification with nor education

<sup>3</sup>Notably, the Virginia Slims campaign also includes ads featuring an African American woman in contemporary attire without such cultural references—a strategy that is used to differentiate the two audiences to whom they are speaking, unlike the case of the Asian and Latino ads which feature exoticized women only.



about Asian cultures, but only the commodification and “objectification” of their people.

**Hennessey Liquor** (Featured in *Vogue*, *In Style*, *Premiere*  
and *Entertainment Weekly*)

The second ad campaign comes from Hennessey, one of the world-leading producers of cognac. Showing some similarities and differences from the approach of Virginia Slims advertisements, the Hennessey ads seem to downplay the more blatant kinds of cultural differences we saw in the former campaign but is still able to connote racial difference through the sexual interplays of its multi-racial cast. The typical design of this advertisement series features two to three models in a set background with one or two words placed strategically next to each figure in order to convey the identities, personalities or thoughts of each model. Usually, the labels have opposite meanings meant to highlight differences among the models. For instance, the first frame in Illustration 3 focuses on two White men and one White woman. The copy indicates that the two male models are a “designer” and a “demolition expert,” while the woman is shown to be an “architect.” The advertisement seeks to challenge social norms and gendered expectations by associating the female with a semi-intellectual profession (architect) as opposed to a feminized, aesthetic-oriented profession (designer). Although interestingly, she is also set in contrast to the masculinized “demolition expert” seated next to her.

Furthermore, the Hennessey campaign is most notable for its invocation of what can be called “gay window advertising” that “speak[s] to the homosexual consumer in a way that the straight consumer will not notice” (Stabiner 1982, p. 81), or “gay- or lesbian-image advertising” (Cortese 1999, p. 38). The strategy of this type of advertising is to feature one person or a group of same-sex people in a sexually ambiguous or androgynous style that does not explicitly speak to homosexuality but can potentially hint to either sexuality or homosexuality. This may explain the inclusion of a male designer. The second photo in this illustration shows an African American and a White woman, a matchmaker and a divorce attorney respectively, dressed in fancy dresses and locking arms as they come out of a car and an unidentified White male holds an umbrella for them in the background. Noticeably, the African American woman’s leg is exposed as she steps out of the car. Another advertisement (not featured here) shows a pair of women’s legs with the label “tomboy.” This type of dual marketing strategy allows companies to attract both homosexual and heterosexual consumers (Stabiner 1982), but as we shall see, subtle references to cross-racial lesbianism may also be used as a ploy to gain the attention of a White male readership.

In particular, the third and fourth photo shots juxtapose Asian American women with White women in order to inject a racial component to sex, sexuality



**Illustration 3.** An advertisement campaign by Hennessy Liquor.

and sexual competition. The first one features an Asian American woman and a White woman in the intimate backseat of a car. The White woman's arm and widespread hand is loosely draped on the bare legs of the Asian American woman, which hints of both lesbianism and domination over the Asian American woman. Interestingly, they are given the same labels, "loves oliver." Interestingly, this particular shot is the one ad that does not provide explicitly opposite labels for its characters, thus pushing the viewers to find hidden oppositional meanings in

the images and messages of the said individuals. The White woman is leaning back on the seat and looking outside and the Asian American woman is sitting up and looking at the camera/viewers. Although the ad hints to lesbianism, her orientation towards the viewers and her thoughts about “oliver” can insinuate that she is looking at/longing for somebody else—presumably Oliver. Furthermore, the fact that both the White and Asian American woman “like oliver” can imply either that their lesbianism is directed towards this unseen third male party or that they are competing sexually for the White man—two common themes in Orientalist depiction of the hyper-sexualized, dragon lady women.

The third frame continues this theme of sexual competitiveness and lesbianism in its portrayal of Asian American women. The ad shows a White and Asian American women both looking into an unseen vanity mirror. The Asian American woman dressed in black is putting lipstick on her lips, presumably prepping for something and the blonde woman is simply half-sitting on the counter in her white feminine dress. The copy labels the White woman as a “vegetarian” and the Asian American woman as a “man-eater”—a play on the word “meat-eater.” The label “man-eater” may be making subtle references to the fact that the White woman may be a lesbian since she does not “eat man” and the Asian American woman is not.

More important is the ad’s use of the word “man-eater,” which conjures up images of an aggressive sexual predator that is played up by the black color of her dress (in contrast to the white dress of her counterpart), the lipstick gesture that indicates preparation for fierce competition, and the general facial structure and glaring expression on the Asian American woman’s face. Second, the term “man-eater” also captures the impure intentions of Asian American women’s desire for White men. While Lotus Blossom stereotypes tend to emphasize Asian women’s sexual submission to White men, Suzie Wong-like images of Asian/American women also depict them as desiring White men as “a ticket to be accepted” (Villapanda 1989) and succeed in life. Suzie Wong characters are portrayed in such a mysterious and manipulative manner that viewers (and the White men) cannot be certain whether her avowal of love is sincere.

The licentiousness and moral depravity suggested in this ad separates the Asian American female character from the virginal purity of her White counterpart in a way that prevents her from truly assimilating into American society despite her exterior appearance of acculturation. Furthermore, the message “mix accordingly” at the bottom of the photo objectifies both female characters for the White male viewer and suggests that he can mix-and-match both sexual embodiments of the White virgin and Asian American man-eater for his own pleasure. Therefore, this part of Hennessey’s message again presumes the male ownership of any women’s sexuality, including white male ownership over Asian American women.



found in different magazines or different issues of the same magazine but take on greater meaning when we place them next to one another. The general schemata of the Ofoto advertisement series features an individual sitting on a chair, looking at an unseen picture of himself/herself with someone else. A caption below the scene describes what the person is looking at.

Thus in the illustration, we see four different frames, each featuring models of different races. The White man is supposedly looking at a photo labeled “Tom Gilmartin with the star of the kindergarten play, Hannah Gilmartin, the purple rabbit princess”—that is, a father and daughter scenario. The photo held by an older African American man is captioned “Daryl Lamar Edwards II with Daryl Lamar Edwards IV”—or grandfather with grandson. The White woman is looking at “A rare nose-to-nose meeting between Carol McBride’s cat, Manny, and her dog, Marley”—a picture of family pets. And last but not least, the Asian/American version of the series—a woman holding a picture of herself or “Tia Fong with a ‘friend’ on her hotel room balcony in Prague.”

Several points stand out in our analysis of these four different ads—the first being that while both the White and African American men are seen to have a connection to their families and lineage, the female characters are not. Although Carol McBride’s wide-legged posture in the ad manifests her power and confidence, her beloved family is her pets, not her family or child. The picture of Tia Fong, the Asian American woman, is even more problematic, because first, Tia’s “friend,” unlike Carol’s pets, does not even have a name and second, she is seeing herself in a hotel room situated in the distant, exotic land of Prague. In essence, Tia Fong is not to be associated with the comforts of home and family but rather, the erotic setting of foreign lands and forbidden pleasures. The fact that Tia’s photo includes a mysterious “friend” and that she is located in Prague evokes mystic images of the Orient. This aspect of positionality is also interesting in its racial implications, because it symbolizes not only Asian Americans’ detachment from both home and lineage but also their dislocation from American society itself. In essence, these advertisements once again hint to the unassimilability of Asians in America.

The illustration of Tia Fong is imbued with other gendered meanings as well—the most obvious of which is the sexual connotation behind the faceless “friend” and the hotel room where she is staying with this friend. Unlike the other two ads that conjure up feelings of familial belonging (albeit a surrogate family in the case of Carol), the Asian/American ad is replete with references to sexual liaisons within a Prague hotel room—perhaps the modern equivalent of a geisha teahouse. The quotations around the word “friend” and the mysterious smile of the Asian American character is meant to imply the forbidden pleasures associated with this trip. Furthermore, her legs are crossed in a demure, intimate manner that is meant to evoke images of Orientalized sitting postures, while her fingers delicately hold the photo in a gesture that strongly resembles the dancing

hand movements of the Virginia Slims Asian model. Again, Ofoto's advertising campaign is drawing on traditional representations of Asian/American women as exotic and erotic objects of White men's sexual adventure.

## CONCLUSION

The article has analyzed three advertisements which best exemplify the diverse ways in which Asian/American women are sexually objectified, culturally misrepresented and visually consumed in contemporary American Orientalism. The Virginia Slims campaign was perhaps the most blatant in its resurrection of Asian/American exotica through its mish-mash of simulated Orientalist paraphernalia. However, even when the physical appearances of Asian/American female characters were normalized in relation to other White American characters, the other advertisements series were shown to make more subtle but powerful messages about their inherent cultural and behavioral unassimilability to American society. The Hennessy liquor campaigns play on the sexual contrasts between White and Asian/American women—the virgin and the whore—but presents both characters as lesbian objects of White male fantasy. The Asian/American woman in this scenario plays the role of sexual predator, or the “man-eater”—much like the Suzie Wong figure who would cater to White male lust but could not be trusted because of her sexual cunning. The Ofoto campaign on the other hand draws on the mystical aspects of Asian/American female sexuality, detaching its characters from the all American setting of family and home and placing them in the exotic spaces of a hotel room in Prague.

The subtle ingenuity of the multicultural advertisement campaign is the way it is able to profit off a multi-racial consumer base through greater inclusion while maintaining White male supremacy through the visual consumption of Asian/American women's bodies. By highlighting the ascribed “foreign” nature of Asian/American women, the cultural schemata of corporate advertisements aim to profit off the sense of identity and place they provide for White males in the U.S. through their products, while simultaneously targeting an increasingly diverse global audience. Thus, the illustrations presented in this study would have had less meaning if they included only two White people or even White and African American characters without the added “foreign” Asian/American presence. Furthermore, corporations market on the physical embodiments of sex and pleasure that take the form of Asian/American women in these advertisements. That is, they are not just selling their liquor or their cigarettes or their services to American society, but they are also selling the *bodies* of Asian/American women and the forbidden pleasures that come with them. The ads also displayed racialized and gendered images of other figures (i.e. White females and African American characters), but the presence of Asian/American seemed to be most central in highlighting the multicultural nature of today's global society vis-a-vis their

exoticization/eroticization, as well as re-affirming White normalcy and supremacy within this global hierarchy.

As our research study has shown, the emerging global culture has been packaged, commodified and marketed by multi-national global corporations in a form that can be sold to dominant White groups attempting to disengage from a historical legacy of racism, segregation and Anglo-conformity. Cultural representations of multiculturalism in corporate advertising campaigns have a more concrete impact on the lived experiences of Asian/American women by reaffirming the complex racial and gender hierarchies underlying the new global order and legitimating the physical domination of their bodies through rape, abuse, exploitation and prostitution. In this way, the perception of multiculturalist advertisements as the symbolic site for cultural diversity and equality overlooks the subtle complexities with which Asian/American bodies are presented and represented to White America.

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