

# Perception of Physical Beauty among Boys and Girls in Hong Kong

*Kara Chan, Maggie Fung, and Tabitha Thomas*

Beauty is an important currency in how we see ourselves and others. Hong Kong is flooded with commercial messages on physical attractiveness. How do children respond to the beauty culture so prevalent in our society? This study aims at (1) examining the cultural concepts of beauty, and (2) how children perceive the relationship between physical attractiveness, personality and friendship. We asked 114 children aged 9 to 12 to draw and verbalize a girl or a boy who was described as good-looking, and a girl or a boy described as not so good-looking. Results indicated that most of the interviewees associated “being not so good-looking” with ugliness. Physical beauty was associated with personality, social relations, happiness, and materialism. Results show a strong stereotype of “beauty-is-good”. Further studies are needed to identify source of the stereotypes and how these perceptions may affect children’s choices in their daily lives.

Many girls and women live unhappy lives because they are not satisfied with their body. Dove, a US based company for health and beauty goods, did an experiment by asking an FBI trained forensic artist to draw two sketches of the same woman, one from her self-description, and one according to a stranger. The sketches showed that participants often underestimate their own physical beauty. This video advocating “you are more beautiful than you think” has been viewed nearly 180 million times since its release (Dove, 2016).

Physical appearance and beauty are powerful agents in our society, and influence how we see ourselves and others, as well as our everyday discourse and decisions (Griffin & Langlois, 2006). The media are full of beautiful people with beauty standard so high that it is almost unreachable. Children and adolescents are particularly susceptible to media influences. Studies found that exposure to idealized body images in television commercials were associated with appearance comparison among adolescent boys and girls, and increased body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls (Hargreaves & Tigger-

---

Chan, Kara, Fung, Maggie, and Thomas, Tabitha (2017). Perception of Physical Beauty among Boys and Girls in Hong Kong p. 107-118 in Dafna Lemish & Maya Götz (eds.) *Beyond the Stereotypes? Images of Boys and Girls, and their Consequences*. Göteborg: Nordicom.

mann, 2004). The concerns may have emerged from media messages that emphasize desirable traits associated with thinness (Tiggermann & Pickering, 1996).

A qualitative study of tween girls and adolescent girls in Hong Kong about what girls or women should or should not be found that both tween girls and adolescent girls put much emphasis on physical appearance (Chan, 2014). Tweens refer to children around 10 to 12 years old who are not yet teens but who have interests different than younger children. Tween girls perceived that girls or women should be good-looking and presentable, and should not wear sexy clothes.

Hong Kong is a good venue to study perceptions about physical beauty because of three reasons. First, there is a strong market force shaping the construction of beauty. Cosmetic and skincare was the top fourth advertising category in 2015 (admanGo, 2016). Secondly, unlike western beauty cultures that often revolve around thinness and height, Chinese beauty culture endorses thinness as well as fairness in skin color (Fung, 2006). Thirdly, very few empirical studies investigated the perception of beauty among young children. To encourage children and youth to think critically about the ideal male and female beauty images prevalent in the media, we need to understand how they perceive persons with or without physical beauty.

## Literature review

### *Cultural construction of beauty and “beauty-is-good” stereotype*

Beauty is a construct that varies with culture and time (Frith, Shaw, & Cheng, 2005). Consumers are constantly acquiring information, products or services that will help them to attain the perceived beauty quality. Marketers position their products in the market embodied with the contemporary ideals of beauty in order to capitalize and fulfill consumers’ need and desire for physical beauty (Bloch & Richins, 1992).

The term beauty has been conceptualized as unidimensional and multidimensional in different cultural perspectives (Englis & Solomon, 1997). The definition of beauty and attractiveness has been consistently projected by the production of media messages through various media channels (Downs & Harrison, 1985). Empirical studies found that attractive people were better liked and assumed to be more sociable, exciting and independent, friendlier and smarter (Brigham, 1980; Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). On the other hand, less attractive people were assumed to be deviant and stigmatized (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) called it the “beauty-is-good” stereotype.

### *Media production process and the emphasis on physical attractiveness*

How is the concept of beauty being constructed? Mass media and popular culture play a significant role in the social construction of physical beauty (Englis & Solomon, 1997).

A survey of 1,027 women aged between 18 and 64 found that their conception of beauty was shaped by “women in the public domain” and social media (Katz, 2015). Marketers, advertising creatives, fashion and beauty editors, designers, sales managers, and photographers play crucial roles in the encoding process of the symbolic and aesthetic imagery of fashion and beauty (Tse, 2014). According to Downs and Harrison’s (1985) content analysis study of network television commercials in the US, one out of every 3.8 commercials contains messages related to physical attractiveness. Systematically, the icons of beauty cast in various mass media act as role models for and are mirrored by individual consumers. Consumers later apply this culturally constructed information to form their own idealized self-image (Morry & Staska, 2001). Furthermore, the stereotypical perception of physical attractiveness applied to both adults and children (Dion et al., 1972).

Particularly, the tween segment is considered by marketers to be powerful influencers of their parents’ consumption (Siegel, Coffey, & Livingston, 2004). Their consumption and responses to marketing communication were motivated differently in cultures of individualism and collectivism (Andersen, Tufte, Rasmussen, & Chan, 2008). A study using drawings and interviews found that girls who owned makeup were perceived to be more attractive, happy, and popular than girls who did not own makeup (Thyne, Robertson, Thomas, & Ingram, 2016). The findings illustrated that tweens were enculturated into contemporary beauty ideals. The construction of beauty images propagated in mass media affect consumers’ global perceptions of their own facial attractiveness and their emotional energy spent on the physical body (Myers & Biocca, 1992; Richins, 1991). Chan (2014) found that tween girls were able to identify individuals and the institutions behind the creation of female images in the media. Consciously, the informants believed that the construction of female images was made for product promotion. Besides, they commented that the female images portrayed in the media were too sexy and passive. They reported that their ideal female images would be active, healthy, and without heavy make-up.

## Objectives and method

This study attempts to achieve the following research objectives

1. to examine the cultural concepts of beauty among Chinese children in Hong Kong;
2. to investigate their perceptions of personality, social relations, and material possessions of a person described as good-looking and a person described as not-so-good looking.

This study employed an interpretivist approach (Neuman, 2003) using a qualitative methodology. The study required the participants to draw pictures, followed by a face-to-face interview about the pictures. The method was appropriate for this study

because children are used to expressing their attitudes and feelings through drawings. The drawings also proved to be a useful way for interviewees to describe the drawings in detail and elaborate what was happening (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2013). The method was inspired by Chan's (2006) work and has been used to collect data from India (Thomas, Robertson, & Thyne, 2015). Altogether 114 undergraduate students taking the classes "Children as consumers" and "Consumer behaviors" participated in the data collection. They were trained to understand the objectives of this study and the procedure to conduct the interviews. The study was conducted in Cantonese (the main Chinese dialect spoken in Hong Kong) in November 2014 at the participants' homes, at the interviewers' homes, or at public places such as libraries and playgrounds.

A convenience sampling method was adopted. Altogether 114 children, including 60 girls and 54 boys, aged between 9 and 12 participated in the study. They were recruited through personal networks. Informed consent was obtained from their parents or guardians before the interview.

Each child was supplied with a piece of plain white A3 paper (size: 11.7 inches in height and 16.5 inches in width). Each piece of paper had two blank boxes of equal size. On top of each box was a statement. On the left the statement was "This is a good-looking girl (or boy)"; on the right it was "This is a not-so-good looking girl (or boy)".

The children were asked to draw what comes to their mind when they read each of the two statements. The instructions were: "I would like you to draw a girl (or a boy) who is good-looking in the box on the left, and a girl (or a boy) who is not-so-good looking in the box on the right. It doesn't matter if the child you draw looks like a real person, but it is important that the child fits the description I just mentioned. There is no right or wrong drawing, and your drawing will not be graded. Do you understand?" After they finished the drawings, the interviewers conducted follow-up face-to-face interviews with them. Interviewers were randomly assigned to recruit a boy or a girl interviewee. In other words, interviewees did not necessarily draw people of the same sex. Six questions were asked:

1. Can you describe each girl or boy you have drawn in five words?
2. How many friends does each girl or boy have?
3. Are these two children happy?
4. What clothes and accessories does each girl or boy own?
5. Which girl or boy is popular?
6. Which girl or boy would you want to be?

The drawing took from 5 to 25 minutes. The interviews took from 6 to 18 minutes.

The interviewers audio recorded the interviews and later transcribed them into Chinese. One of the authors coded the drawings and answers to each questions onto Excel worksheets. Prominent visual components of objects and facial expressions of the human characters for both pictures were identified and coded after examining all the

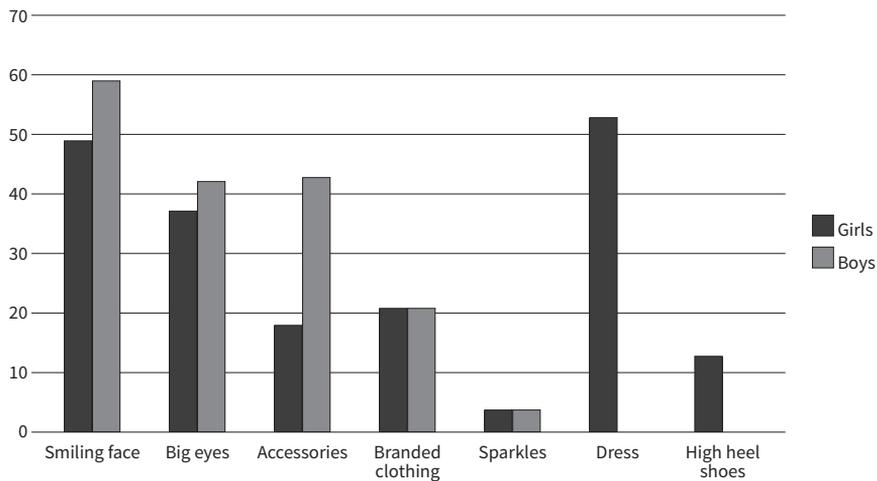
drawings. The other author read the codes. Disagreements were identified and resolved through discussion. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed question by question across interviews by one of the authors. Major themes were identified by one of the authors and verified by another author. These themes became the focus of this article.

## Results

### *The drawings*

The frequencies of seven prominent visual components identified from the drawings of girls described as pretty and boys described as good-looking are shown in Figure 1. A girl or boy described as good looking was distinguished physically by having big eyes. They were smiling and were surrounded with sparkles, suggesting charm and radiance.

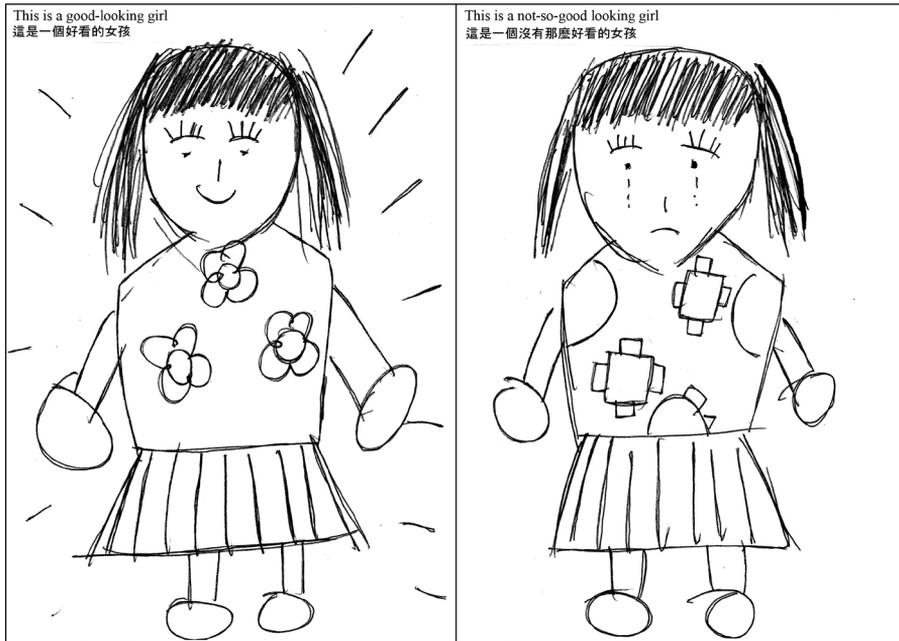
**Figure 1.** Frequencies of visual elements of a good-looking person by sex of participants (N=114)



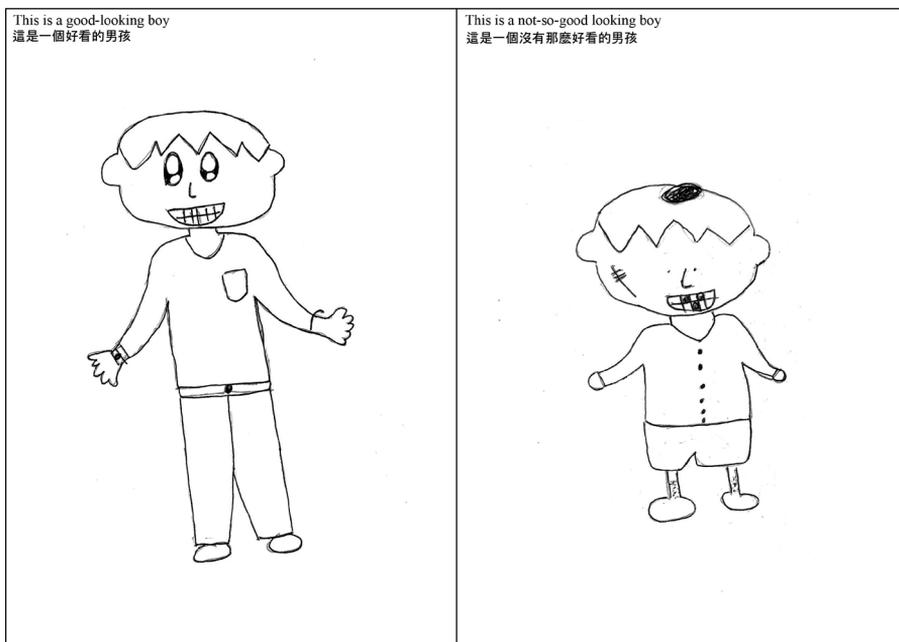
They were also distinguished by their outfit, including branded clothing, accessories, and jewelry. The good-looking girl drew by interviewees often wore dresses and high heel shoes. Figure 2 and Figure 3 show typical drawings of girls and boys, respectively.

The frequencies of six prominent visual components identified from the drawings of girls and boys described as not so good-looking are shown in Figure 4. A girl or boy described as not so good-looking was distinguished physically by being fat. They had skin defects such as acnes, blemishes, and scars. They had bad teeth. Their faces were sad. They wore clothes with patches, indicating that they were poor. The not-so-good looking girl drew by interviewees were less likely to wear a dress than the good-looking girl drew by interviewees.

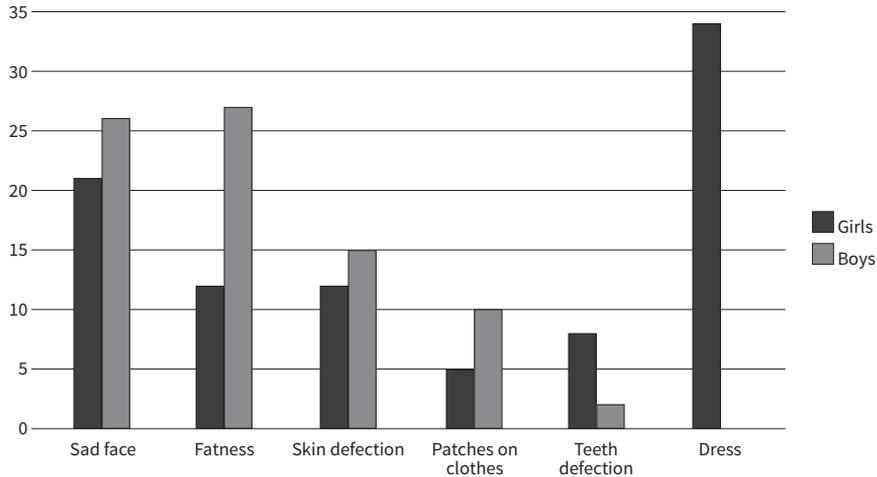
**Figure 2.** A drawing of a good-looking girl and a not-so-good looking girl



**Figure 3.** A drawing of a good-looking boy and a not-so-good looking boy



**Figure 4.** Frequencies of visual elements of a not-so-good looking person by sex of participants (N=114)



## The interviews

An analysis of the interview transcripts generated six major themes as follows.

Theme 1: Beauty was associated with positive qualities.

Most participants perceived a good-looking person to be friendly and polite, and a not so good-looking person to be mean and impolite. The words/phrases most frequently used to describe the qualities of a good-looking child included friendly/polite (53 times), cheerful (33), elegant (24), smart (16), sporty (15), and nice (15). On the other hand, the words/phrases most frequently used to describe a not so good-looking child included mean/impolite (40 times), bad-tempered (24), stupid (10), and cowardly (8). A 9-year old boy said,

The good looking boy is handsome and tidy... His clothes are clean. He is nice to others. The not so good-looking one is impolite, always act like a boss, and gossip about others. Nobody likes him. He also teases the classmates all the time.

Theme 2: Beauty was associated with popularity.

The participants perceived a good-looking person as having more friends than a not so good-looking person. In response to the question "How many friends does each girl or boy have?" 40 per cent of the participants thought that a good-looking child would have 6 to 10 friends. Another 25 per cent thought they would have more than 20 friends. Altogether 28 per cent thought they would have many, or hundreds of friends. On the other hand, 79 per cent of the participants thought that the not so good-looking child

would have fewer than five friends. Another 13 per cent thought they would have very few friends or even no friend. The word/phrase most frequently used to describe the social relations of a good-looking child was lovable (28 times), while that used to describe the social relations of a not so good-looking child was lonely (24 times). Ninety-three per cent of the participants perceived a good-looking child to be popular (per cent). Only 7 per cent thought that a not so good-looking child would be popular. For instance, an 11 year old boy described the social relations of the people he drew as follows.

I'd say the handsome boy has a lot of friends because he's probably very ... polite and nice. And he's probably very good to his friends and other people. Probably he also ... he also washes his hands regularly. He's very clean so people like to be close to him. Well, I think he has a lot of friends. ... I think the not so good-looking boy's got very few friends. He's also very dirty...um...very (shows disgust) ugly ... and not so nice.

Theme 3: Beauty was associated with happiness.

A majority (95 per cent) of the participants perceived a good-looking child to be happy. On the other hand, only 39 per cent of the participants perceived a not so good-looking child to be happy, and 61 per cent perceived a not so good-looking child to be unhappy. A 10-year old girl said,

Maybe the prettier one is happier, since she has many friends willing to play with her.

Theme 4: Beauty was associated with materialism.

The participants perceived a good-looking child to have expensive, trendy, and branded clothes, and a not so good-looking child to have dull, ugly, and ordinary clothes. In terms of accessories and possessions, a good-looking child was perceived to have expensive watches, necklaces, hair pins, earrings, bracelets, leather belts, smartphones, Barbie dolls and electronic toys. A not so good-looking child was perceived to have broken glasses, old watches, ordinary accessories or t-shirts. A 12-year old girl said,

The good-looking one will own many pretty dresses, branded dresses and pants, everything on her should be branded. However, the average-looking one should not wear branded clothing, since other children will tease her. They should wear t-shirt and jeans.

Theme 5: Not so good-looking was associated with ugliness and dirtiness.

A boy or a girl described as "not so good-looking" was often perceived as ugly or dirty. The words/phrases most frequently used to describe the appearance of a not so good-looking child included ugly (60 times), dirty/messy (49), fat (35), short (20), having small eyes (18), and having little hair (18). On the other hand, the words/phrases most

frequently used to describe a good-looking child included pretty (33 times), handsome (30), clean/tidy (27), tall (25), having long hair (23), and having big eyes (20). A 10 year-old boy said,

I feel that the good looking one is handsome and tall, good hearted, clean and pay respect to others. The not so good-looking one is messy, and his clothes are dirty. His heart is ugly too... and ... and also he is unhappy.

Theme 6: The participants wished to be good-looking.

Altogether 102 out of 114 participants reported that they would like to be the good-looking child that they drew. A majority of participants commented that they want to be the good-looking child because he or she was kind and he or she had many friends. Only nine participants reported that they would like to be the not-so-good looking child. These children reported that being not-so-good looking will avoid the trouble of having too many boyfriends, or taking too much time in dress-up. The remaining three participants were happy to be either one. A nine-year old girl provided a typical response:

I wish to be the good-looking one. I think everybody wants to be pretty like a princess. I want to live in a castle, have a lot of beautiful clothes, many friends... Then I can invite all my friends to come to my castle, dance together, and be very happy.

## Discussion

This study demonstrated that children hold strong stereotypes about a child's appearance. Those who are good-looking were perceived differently from those who are not so good-looking. The most striking result is the strong association between looks and social relations. A good-looking child was perceived to be friendly, cheerful, and popular. On the other hand, a not so good-looking child was perceived to be mean, lonely, and unpopular. Because of the strong association of physical beauty and having many friends, nearly all participants reported that they would like to be good-looking. In Chan's (2006) study, a child with a lot of toys was perceived to be happy, but was also perceived to be wasteful and showy by some older participants. In the current study, the participants did not report a single negative attribute of a good-looking child. The idealization of good-looking people is remarkable.

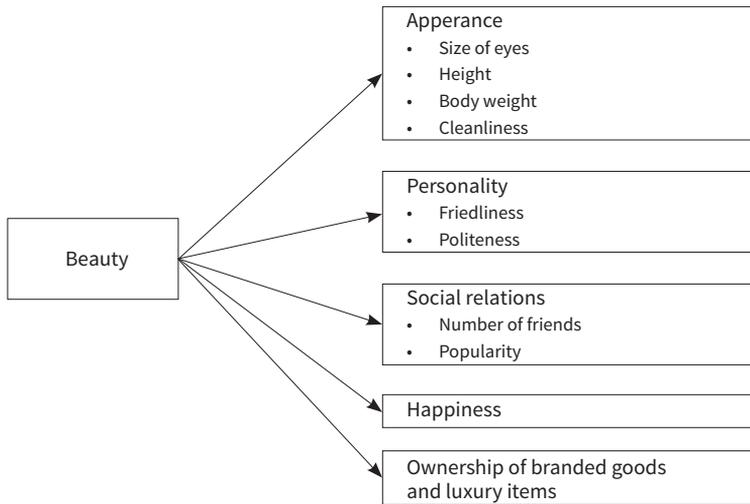
The current study found that participants shared many similarities in their perception of beauty. Having big eyes was associated with beauty. Being fat, having skin defects and teeth defects were associated with ugliness. We did not find a strong association between thinness and beauty. Perhaps children of this age do not care about thinness as much as adult females do. Part of the reason is due to the coding process. It is easier to identify fatness than thinness from the drawings. Among the words/phrases used to

describe a good-looking child, thinness was seldom brought up. The result was consistent with a previous study among tween girls and adolescent girls (Chan, 2014). Tween girls often associated beauty with presentable clothes and good manner. Adolescent girls considered the thin female images in the media as ridiculous and unbelievable. Instead, they preferred females who showed natural beauty, not too thin, and without heavy make-up (Chan, 2014).

The drawings and the interviews showed that there was a strong link between beauty and materialism. The result was similar to that found in Thomas, Rebertson, and Thyne’s (2015) study. These findings aligned with Richins (1994) in the perceptions of an individual based on the possessions they own.

Based on the themes revealed in the study, we propose in Figure 5 a conceptual framework related to physical beauty. The model can be put to test using quantitative surveys. It is expected that quantitative data will provide a measure of the link between the concept of physical beauty and the concepts of social relations, happiness, and specific personality attributes.

**Figure 5.** Conceptual framework related to physical beauty revealed in this study



To conclude, the current study provides empirical evidence that children ages 9 to 12 had strong stereotypical “beauty-is-good” perceptions about persons described as good-looking or not-so-good looking. Further study is needed to identify sources of socialization, and how such perceptions will influence their processing of images with ideal beauty prevalent in the media.

## References

- admanGo (2016). Top 10 advertising categories, January to November 2016. Retrieved from [www.adman-go.com.hk](http://www.adman-go.com.hk) (by subscription)
- Andersen, L., Tufte, B., Rasmussen, J., & Chan, K. (2008). The tweens market and responses to advertising in Denmark and Hong Kong. *Young Consumers*, 9(3), 189-200. doi: 10.1108/17473610810901624
- Belk, R., Fischer, E., & Kozinets, R. V. (2013). *Qualitative consumer and marketing research*, London, Sage.
- Bloch, P. H., & Richins, M. L. (1992). You look "marvelous": The pursuit of beauty and the marketing concept. *Psychology & Marketing*, 9(1), 3-15.
- Brigham, J. C. (1980). Limiting conditions of the "physical attractiveness stereotype": Attributions about divorce. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 14(3), 365-375. doi: 10.1016/0092-6566(80)90019-7
- Chan, K. (2006). Exploring children's perception of material possessions: A drawing study. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 9(4), 352-366.
- Chan, K. (2014). *Girls and media: Dreams and realities*. Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong Press.
- Dion, K., Berscheid, E., & Walster, E. (1972). What is beautiful is good. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 24(3), 285-290. doi: 10.1037/h0033731
- Dove (2016). Dove real beauty sketches. Retrieved from <http://www.dove.com/uk/stories/campaigns/real-beauty-sketches.html>
- Downs, A. C., & Harrison, S. K. (1985). Embarrassing age spots or just plain ugly? Physical attractiveness stereotyping as an instrument of sexism on American television commercials. *Sex Roles*, 13(1/2), 9-19. doi: 10.1007/BF00287457
- Eagly, A. H., Ashmore, R. D., Makhijani, M. G., & Longo, L. C. (1991). What is beautiful is good, but...: A meta-analytic review of research on the physical attractiveness stereotype. *Psychological Bulletin*, 110(1), 109-128. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.110.1.109
- Englis, B. G., & Solomon, M. R. (1997). Where perception meets reality: The social construction of lifestyles. In L. Kahle & L. Chiagouris (Eds.), *Values, Lifestyles, and Psychographics* (pp. 25-44). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Fung, A. (2006). Gender and advertising: The promotional culture of whitening and slimming. In K. Chan (Ed.), *Advertising and Hong Kong Society* (pp. 171-181), Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
- Frith, K., Shaw, P., & Cheng, H. (2005). The construction of beauty: A cross-cultural analysis of women's magazine advertising. *Journal of Communication*, 55(1), 56-70. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2005.tb02658.x
- Griffin, A. M., & Langlois, J. H. (2006). Stereotype directionality and attractiveness stereotyping: Is beauty good or is ugly bad? *Social Cognition*, 24(2), 187-206. doi: 10.1521/soco.2006.24.2.187
- Hargreaves, D. A., & Tiggemann, M. (2004). Idealized media images and adolescent body image: "Comparing" boys and girls. *Body Image*, 1(4), 351-361. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2004.10.002
- Katz, B. (2015). New study shows impact of social media on beauty standards. Retrieved from <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2015/04/03/new-study-shows-impact-of-social-media-on-beauty-standards/>
- Morry, M.M., & Staska, S.L. (2001). Magazine exposure: Internalization, self-objectification, eating attitudes, and body satisfaction in male and female university students. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 33(4), 269-279. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0087148>
- Myers, P. N., & Biocca, F. A. (1992). The elastic body image: The effect of television advertising and programming on body image distortions in young women. *Journal of Communication*, 42(3), 108-133. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1992.tb00802.x
- Neuman, W. L. (2003). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Richins, M. L. (1991). Social comparison and the idealized images of advertising. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18(1), 71-83. doi: 10.1086/209242
- Richins, M. L. (1994). Special possessions and the expression of material values. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(3), 522-533.
- Siegel, D. L., Coffey, T. J., & Livingston, G. (2004). *The Great Tween Buying Machine: Capturing Your Share of the Multi-billion-dollar Tween Market*. Chicago: Dearborn Trade Publishing.
- Thomas, T., Robertson, K. and Thyne, M. (2015). "Am I fair and lovely: Indian children's perceptions of

- physical attractiveness and their links with materialism”, in North America Advances in Consumer Research Volume 43, eds. Kristin Diehl and Carolyn Yoon, Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research, page 810.
- Thyne, M., Robertson, K., Thomas, T., & Ingram, M. (2016). “It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness”: Expectancies associated with tween makeup ownership. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. Published online on Jun 22, 2016. doi: 10.1111/ijcs.12299
- Tiggemann, M., & Pickering, A. S. (1996). Role of television in adolescent women's body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness. *International Journal of Eating Disorder*, 20(2), 199-203. doi: 10.1002/(SICI)1098-108X(199609)20:2
- Tse, T. (2014). Fashion media communication in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 7(2), 66-74. doi: 10.1080/17543266.2014.921244