The Commercialized Body:  
A Comparative Study of Culture and Values

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This paper is concerned with the social construction of the body in information society. In a word, how is the body viewed and treated by postmodern society via its vehicles of communication. To answer this question we focus on television commercials in two information-based countries: America and Japan. The rationale for medium selection and comparative focus are specified in the text. The research involved the systematic collection of over 7,000 ads from the 7 major networks (4 in Japan, 3 in America) in cities of roughly comparable geo-political and demographic characteristics. Via theoretical sampling, a subset of 2353 (1221 from Japan, 1132 from America) was selected. Coding revealed that 581 (or 25%) involved the body in non-trivial ways. The presentation and use of body differed by country: 30% of American advertising versus 20% of Japanese CMs contained body content.

Four working hypotheses guided analysis. H1: two vastly different societies would commercialize the body in ways more similar than different; H2: a high degree of “body content” would exist in both societies; H3: “body consciousness”—i.e. intentional use of the body—would be higher in America than in Japan; H4: recurrent tendencies in body presentation would be uncovered. With specifiable qualifications, all four hypotheses were confirmed.

Four key findings emerged from this research. (1) confirmation of converging culture; (2) the narrow, repetitive and powerful messages in commercial media; (3) the centrality of societal images concerning identity and personal behavior (as communicated via the body); and (4) the emerging importance of the body as a social object in America and Japan. I conclude that the commercialized body is an increasingly central object in contemporary society.

KEYWORDS: Body, Social Construction, Advertising, Comparative Sociology, Societal Convergence

Introduction

The Body and Society

In the past two decades social science has discovered the body as a fertile object of intellectual inquiry. Surprisingly, sociology has been one of the last disciplines to engage in the discourse (Frank 1991). The earliest contributions came by way of social anthropology (e.g. Goffman 1959) and postmodern critiques of capitalist rationality (e.g. Marcuse 1969, Bell 1976, Foucault 1980). By contrast, sociological explorations have been particularly limited, overly general and lacking “a specific theorization of the social reality of the body” (Berthelot 1991).

One of the earliest attempts at conceptualization was Turner’s (1984), which, in the Hobbesian tradition, saw the body as subject to and bound within a societal frame of regulation and control. This likely bore some linkage to Foucault (1979) whose high-visibility writings at the time presented bodies as passive, subject, bound within institutional settings, being acted upon by authorities and structures.

Frank’s (1991) reaction has been to recast the body question. Existing social theory is turned on its head such that the body is viewed as posing a problem of action, rather than of system. This has led to a complex typology, comprised of four continua, within which four “styles of body usage” fit.

Such efforts, while helpful and likely relevant, seem far removed from everyday experience. Those steeped in qualitative and anthropologic traditions more readily view the body in terms of its connections with daily life. At the deepest intellectual remove, they see the body as a medium for symbolic exchange. Practically, though, they seek, as Glassner has done, to find evidence of everyday lives touched by the “various expectations about (peoples’) bodies, imposed on them by the culture, by their families, and by their own self-images” (1992: 21). In this way, work on the body, while revealing (and working to confirm) Frank’s categories, is grounded.

1On this characterization of Goffman’s early work see Frank (1991: 36); on the enduring centrality of body in Goffman’s work see Turner (1991: 11).
2This chain of succession in so-called “postmodern” thought is suggested by Turner (1991). It is consistent with views of writers such as Giddens (1992).
3On this interpretation of Foucault, see Lash (1991).
4The continua include: control, desire, relation to others, and self-relatedness. The styles of usage include: the disciplined body, the mirroring body, the dominating body, and the communicating body.
Through focused interviews, participant observation and content analysis, a vast range of concerns and practices pertaining to body (i.e. health and diet, pleasure and pain, social practices, technologies of control, self-image, cultural ideals and representations) are uncovered.

In such a way, researchers have been able to explore the society/body nexus that earlier theorists only hinted at or about which they were only able to speculate. Focusing on categories that emerge from everyday practices, human linkage, orientation to the social world, possibilities, perception and action can more easily be specified. Bolstered by insights from the popular culture and media studies genres concerning social construction and cultural reproduction, understanding about the body has become both more sophisticated and less obtuse. The body's symbolic capacity—its role as medium, its placement in and treatment by society—has come to the fore.

The present study adopts such an outlook. It observes how the body is treated in commercial media. This includes how idea-images in ads are associated with the body, transmitted through it, and exchanged for it. In this way we see the body possessing a dual capacity: (1) it is a medium utilized by another medium in service of society's consumption-oriented aims; and (2) it is a medium, itself—an object with a robust symbolic capacity. To invoke McLuhan (1964), the body is both the content of a form, as well as a form containing its own content. In such a way, cultural ideals, uses, pressures, emotions, commodification, consumption and performance (to name but a few) are communicated through the body. The purpose of the paper is to expose these dual roles and decode their multiple symbols—a reduction set I call "the commercialized body" (Plate 1).

The Social Construction of the Body

The commercialized body is not just an academic fiction. It is a tangible phenomenon in consumer society. It is one manifestation of what might be called the "social construction of the body": the messages humans receive about the body from society. Research on social construction is intimately tied to communication: where

![PLATE 1: The Commercialized Body: cultural ideals, performance, parts, representations, pressures, emotions, commodification, uses. By row, left to right. Kao: Monohonah baba bath salts (Japan); Formulartrim 3000 (America); Hirose rentals (J); Lysol toilet bowl cleaner (A); Taishou Seiyaku: Ripobian D (J); Cover girl: cosmetics (A); Bandai: Super bar code wars (J); Sega: Genesis (A); Riken: non-oil deressing (J); Nordic Track: Exerciser (A); Yukijirushi: Hokaido butter (J); Toyota Paseo (A); National: Soille shaver (J); Coca-Cola (A); Kleenex: tissue (J); Caliente: perfume (A).]

See, for instance, Simmel (1950: 409), who speaks of "the fight with nature which primitive man has to wage for his bodily existence attains in this modern form its latest transformation . . . freeing himself of all the historical bonds in the state and in religion, in morals and in economics."

See, for instance, Kellner's (1995) work on identity in the "media culture" society; see also Jenks' volume (1993) where modern culture—whose centerpiece is often the mediated body—becomes and begets itself.

For a precursor to this view see Gallagher’s and Laveau’s (1987) collection of the symbolic treatment of the body in everyday life in the nineteenth century.

What Fiske (1989) calls "polysemic openness"—the multiplicity of images and ideas in a text. Many contemporary writers (e.g. Kellner 1995) have shown how texts get turned inside out or fold back on themselves, placing contradictory meaning units alongside one another.
messages come from and in what form. The ultimate purpose of a construction approach is to link symbolic communication to societal forms and activities—to identify the reproductive function and productive potential inherent in communication.9

In short, by decoding symbolic content—the look, thoughts, feelings and acts concerning the human body—we observe more than a commercial appeal. We encounter deeper text—what a semiologist calls “second order signification” (Barthes 1967). Uncovering a chain of such signification can reveal the “myths” (Barthes 1973) embedded in a culture, fundamental values describing how humans should (as opposed to do) look, think, feel and act. The social constructionist goes even further, though, arguing that such mythic images, in turn, serve as medium shaping the future ideational and practical environment in which humans live.

About the Research

In order to demonstrate this, our study focuses on messages about the body contained in television commercials in two countries—America and Japan.

Why Comparative? One dimension of modernity has been the situation of the individual within an institutional context (Giddens 1992). In such a way, power is exerted over the body (Foucault 1980). At the same time, not all instrumentalities of control treat the body equally, nor, as Acker (1991) has observed, “concretely”\textemdash. In fact, not only do institutions fragment bodies, some writers suggest that certain contexts accord specific body parts differential treatment due to the ritual importance of that particular body part within the focal culture (Goffman 1956). Assuming this to be true, one would expect commercial images of the body in two societies as valuationally and ritualistically different as America and Japan to treat the body in differentially ways. Fragmentation, foci and manner of presentation should differ, as well as degree of import.

At the same time, my past work on commercial culture (Holden 1994a) has shown that even countries as apparently dissimilar as America and Japan share a wide array of socio-cultural practices and consumer-commercial symbols. We choose a comparative analytic framework, then, in order to establish whether the body is, comparatively speaking, treated in similar or different ways.

Why Commercials? We select commercials for many reasons. First, because, as Featherstone (1991: 170) puts it, “within consumer culture, advertisements . . . provide a proliferation of stylized images of the body.” Relatedly, but more importantly, ads are, in the words of my earlier work (1993), “directive” and “selective”. They direct viewers toward particular attitudes, lifestyles and images rather than others. They select out for presentation a highly circumscribed image of contemporary life. In this case, I suggest, direction and selection center on commercializing the body.

Why Only Commercials? As a pervasive presence—indeed, the major form of symbolic communication in contemporary consumer culture (Jhally 1987)—commercials are not only sufficient as a data source, they are becoming a necessary medium for symbolic definition, input, influence and exchange. This is certainly true as consumer society matures10 and, in the opinion of some (e.g. Baudrillard 1994), comes to consume us. In a word, ads are more than a central link in the consumer/commodity nexus (Haug 1986). They comprise an ever-broadening system of signification (Williamson 1978), at the center of our national life (Williams 1993), laden with content that operates either beneath the surface or through the ad (see Goldman 1992). These “unstated meaning structures” (Cicourel 1964) have multiple meanings (Hall 1980) which can be rearranged, represented, transmitted and exchanged (Williamson 1978).

The body is a symbolic vessel. As such, and given the fact that there is polysemy in signs (Fiske 1989), one might claim that it would open into countless interpretations. However, in its commercial capacity, the body is more univocal. The ways it is symbolized in ads are limited, narrow and repetitive.

About the Body in Commercials. “Within consumer culture,” Featherstone and Hepworth write, “we are surrounded by images of slim, attractive, youthful bodies and are constantly reminded that individuals who look after their bodies will stay healthier, live longer and preserve their figures and their good looks,” (1991: 202). Kellner (1995: 251) comments on the tendency to couple slim bodies with a certain brand of “slim, light” cigarette, thereby associating the product with socially desireable traits, as well as “promot(ing) the ideal of slim-ness as the ideal type of femininity.” These writers, in short, establish links between body, consumption, commercialization and social values and practices.

Such work, however, at best only offers suggestions about the commercialized body; at worst, mere stereotype. It is not enough to talk in generalities about the body in ads. There are various styles of presentation and use of the body in ads, as well as multiple symbols encoded within the commercialized body. The present

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9This approach adheres closely to Berger and Luckmann (1967), who see society operating through so-called “symbolic universes” of its members. These spheres are peppered, populated and shaped by the signs disseminated from society’s multiple message transmitters. The content, in turn, is interpreted and acted on by members (in interaction with others), thereby reinforcing or altering societal form and activity.

10For a more extensive version of this argument, see Lull (1995: 71), who talks about symbolic (and its “correlate” cultural) power arising as a result of commercial mass media.
research seeks to move beyond limited stereotypes and identify the multiple, specific ways the body is commercialized.

In my earlier work on advertising (Holden 1993, 1994a, b) body comprised a dominant, recurrent code in the sample. However, in what ways was body packaged? What roles did it assume? In what capacities was it symbolized? Reanalysis revealed that ads featuring bodies could be recoded in at least ten ways. These included: health, fitness, body consciousness, sexuality, sexism, diet, body alteration, mental health, eating practices and physical disorders. These categories—constructed utilizing positivistic/qualitative procedures\(^\text{11}\)—served as the basis for the analysis to follow.

**Method**

The data, as well as its manner of treatment, has been well-detailed in other work (Holden 1993, 1994a). I highlight the essentials, below.

**The Samples**

Our aim was to simulate the commercial environment for the television viewer in both countries. To do so, four weeks of advertising was compacted into one “ideal” week per country. In such a way, a symbolic commercial universe was constructed comprised of messages that could strike a television viewer tuning into any major station, Monday through Sunday, morning, afternoon or night.

Regular programming was recorded in two roughly comparable sites—Baltimore, Maryland, USA, and Sendai, Miyagi, Japan. The recording followed a prearranged rotation. In all, over 670 hours of programming was recorded. From this, over 20,000 CMs were culled. Once collected, all ads were reduced to a so-called “second generation tape”, eliminating all programming and repeat ads. This left over 7,000 commercials. By “theoretical sampling” (Glaser and Strauss 1967) a final sample of 2353 CMs (1221 in Japan; 1132 in America) was constructed. The ads were then coded generally for body-related content. From this sample 335 (or 30%) in America and 246 (or 20%) in Japan were found to have body-related content.\(^\text{12}\) Following this procedure, the subsample of body-related ads were placed on separate tapes and coded once again—this time for a specific set of body-only symbols and themes.

**The Coding Process**

Coding was conducted by a team of trained, rotating members. No more than 3 members watched CMs at any one sitting. A pre-tested, standardized coding sheet—informing by literature review and, thus, expanded from the earlier study—guided coding. The final measures included: Representation, Sexism, Sexual content, Psyche, Use, Enhancement, Health, Diet, Medical condition, Body parts, Body language, Life cycle, Type, Ideal, Functions, Status, Necessity, and Degree of activity. Of the 2353 commercials viewed, 581 or 25%, pertained to the body. Clearly, the amount of body-related messages in TV advertising was not trivial.

**The Analytic Process**

Following coding, twin operations ensued. First, an index of all body-related CMs was compiled. This enabled us to categorize the type and number of each commercialized presentation. Our second task was to conduct a qualitative analysis of this subsample.

**Working Hypotheses**

The research was guided by four confirmable hypotheses. The first (H1) was that, despite vast socio-cultural differences, Japan and America would be more similar than different in matters concerning the commercialized body. This hypothesis was based, in part, on texts which argue that the commercial form is similar across cultures, due to shared commercial technology (Ewen and Ewen 1992), shared media culture (Kellner 1995), finite interactive (“engineering”) loops in electronic communication (Leiss 1994), identical consumption-based organization (Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1986), and parallel processes of meaning construction and operation (i.e. Baudrillard 1994). More, my earlier work (Holden 1994a) on comparative ad culture revealed considerable shared socio-cultural content.

Second, we expected to find a high degree of “body content” in both societies (H2). That is, as a percentage of hidden messages (i.e. deeper content) concerning bodily-centered sexism, sexuality, health, fitness, and body-

\(^\text{11}\) On definitions and criteria underlying this specific approach see Denzin (1989) and Bogdan and Biklen (1982).

\(^\text{12}\) Of course, society being comprised of humans, and humans being housed in bodies, means that any commercial which contains a human could, conceivably, be coded for body. By this measure, over 90% of our sample would qualify as body-related. However, we decided that only commercials involving non-trivial presentations of body would be considered. By non-trivial we meant cases in which the body was depicted in a way as to make a statement about the body, signify some social object or phenomenon, and/or serve to achieve some social end.
consciousness (to name but a few) was presumed to be quite high. In part, this premise was based on the claim that the body has attained an elevated status in consumer culture (e.g. Featherstone 1991), as well as an earlier study (Holden 1993) suggesting a high degree of body content in Japanese advertising.

However, as a proportion of covert content, "body consciousness"—by which we meant attention to and intentional use of the body in CMs—would be higher in America than in Japan (H1). This claim was based on previous work (Holden 1994a) indicating a relatively higher amount of body-centered imagery in American ads.

Fourth, pronounced, recurrent tendencies in body presentation would be found in both societies—viewed in isolation and together (H4). To wit, we expected positive presentation of fitness and exercise; endorsements for certain eating habits such as vitamins, sugar substitutes, diet foods, milk, etc.; an emphasis on health, beauty and fitness; a narrow focus in terms of age groups and ethnicities; a good deal of body fragmentation; and a tendency to express lifestyle and social organization via the body.

**Results and Discussion**

In general, each of the four hypotheses was confirmed—with a number of caveats and important exceptions. These findings are summarized in Table 1 and explored in detail, below.

**H1: Shared Tendencies**

The first hypothesis lies at the core of all four study questions. For this reason, shared elements touching upon the other hypotheses will be reserved for those sections. In general, though, a baseline of similarity was uncovered. Foremost, body content was highly visible in ads in both societies.

While all coding categories could be found in each sample, a limited core recurred. These included: health, fitness, sexuality, sexism, body consciousness, body functions and body parts. Moreover, both countries utilized similar strategies in body presentation: pleasure and pain, exercise and diet, sexism, body enhancement and altered representation (see Plate 2).

True, these messages were not uniform. Both samples varied in the nature, degree and frequency of presentation. For instance, in Japan there was a greater tendency to present the body in mechanical terms. In America exercise and fitness were more pronounced. Still, rather than difference, the commercialization of the body appears qualitatively and quantitatively similar in both commercial cultures.

**H2: Differential Body Consciousness**

As a proportion of content, however, body consciousness was clearly higher in America than Japan. The ten percent difference, I believe, bespeaks an underlying cultural difference. As any introductory text will assert Japan and the United States differ in the orientation of individual to group (e.g. Reischauer 1977: 127). This difference is manifested in terms of physical distance, attachment and behavior (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986: 226–7). Individuation, too, differs (Doi 1971), enabling the individual easier separation from the social corpus in America than Japan. Similarly (and, in part, as a result) fragmentation of the body is more likely in the American context. Cultural differences in group/individual orientation should be spied in the commercialized body.

I would argue, however, that a more fundamental force is at work in determining commercial difference. To wit, the commercialized body reflects relative stages of socio-cultural, political-economic development. In contrast to Japan, America's present stage of development places the body at center, treating it through the lens of health, nutrition, fitness, diet, beauty and sports. The leisurely, luxuriated, individuated, nurtured body is situated at the heart of American ads in a way one cannot spy in Japanese ads.

**Health and Fitness.** Perhaps the clearest example of this developmental notion is health and fitness. American culture has revered these ideals since the 1960s, incorporating healthy, dietary foods as staples in the 1970s, and

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<th>Hypothesis</th>
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<td>H1: Two vastly different societies would commercialize the body in ways more similar than different.</td>
<td>Confirmed. Specific findings listed in Table 2.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H2: A high degree of &quot;body content&quot; would be found in ads in both societies.</td>
<td>Confirmed. Second order signification (hidden content) greater in America.</td>
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<td>H3: &quot;Body consciousness&quot;, defined as intentional use of the body in ads, would be higher in America than Japan.</td>
<td>Confirmed. More intentional use (overt or first-order signification) greater in America.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H4: Recurrent tendencies in body presentation would be uncovered.</td>
<td>Confirmed. Specifics listed in Table 2.</td>
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(with the assistance of cable TV) installing sports as a major part of evening and weekend entertainment in the 1980s. Advertising is a lynchpin in the television industry. Ad content reflects America's cultural turn by centering on nutrition, sports, health consciousness and bodily activity. Importantly, American ads stress the body as a willing, avid participant in the "on the go" lifestyle. Americans play to the hilt with a smile. This is in contrast to Japanese ads where the body is subject to a rigorous daily life. Content emphasizes confinement to drudgery, endless, routine work and required after-hours "play". Typical representations of this difference can be found in Plate 3.

**Work and Play.** This difference in approach to the body is captured well by comparing ads from the two countries for the same product. In Japan the salaryman's demanding schedule leaves him with stomach pain during the obligatory (and no less stressful) karaoke session with colleagues. In America, the same work-induced stomach ache dissolves into a pleasant session of bowling. In a second version European sightseeing results once the pain has been expunged. Unlike Japan, then, the American body is depicted in transition from work to relaxation or, more often, merely in the act of play. Under such conditions the active body, the liberated body, the willful body is emphasized.
H3: Positioning and Alternative Perception

These differences in body centrality emerged not only in overt, but in covert (or deeper) content, as well. In America, above all, the body served as a medium operating between the cracks of consciousness, sending secondary messages about society's orientation to body style, function and practice.

The Leisure Lifestyle. The area most clearly demonstrating this point is the national difference concerning leisure. The contrast to Japan's mundane, work-centered focus was rife in American ads. Most centrally, the American body was not merely active, it was active in pursuit of rest and relaxation. Concerns flow from this perspective, notably the body's prospects for peace, happiness and satisfaction of wants. For example, in one ad a man subjects his body to a vigorous workout, leaving him concerned that his body odor will interfere with winning the maiden's hand. The ad's denouement verily trumpets: "fear not: if you use our under-arm roll-on, you can have your workout and a thriving sex life, too."

Of course, this example concerns athletics as much as activity. Unlike Japan, sports ads are ubiquitous in America. Soccer, basketball, tennis, golf and baseball appear frequently. Above all, though, American ads treat sports as a normal bodily operation engaged in by everyday folk. This is in contrast with Japan, where sports, in general, and the mass, in particular, are noticeably absent (Plate 4).

Keeping the Body Under Control. The athletic body fits within a larger movement in American ads: health and fitness in service of commerce. The toning up, slimming down, shaping and caring for the body are all fodder for the commercialized body in America (Plate 5). Skiing simulators, weight control clinics, food substitutes, appetite suppressants all serve as technologies of control, aimed at making the body more subject. This is a feature absent in Japanese ads. Moreover, when present, this control is aimed almost exclusively at women. This serves to remind us that there are other, more fundamental mechanisms of control at work in Japanese society than those related to body.

The Nurtured Body: a Sign of Socio-Cultural Development? Anthropologists have argued that the variety of
a particular item—say the number of words used by Eskimos to express snow—is a sign of what a culture values; a sign of the significance, status and position of an object in the society. Certainly food ads in America operate like snow to the eskimo. The array of choices available, as well as the variations on any one single item\(^\text{13}\) declare that multi-choice, mass-marketed, pre-packaged food is centrally positioned in American culture (Plate 6). It possesses Barthes-like mythical status. Certainly, the numerous vitamin and dietary options reveal how Americans view and treat their bodies. This is in contrast with Japan where foodstuffs are less body-centered, nutrient-laden and diet-oriented. While diet products exist in Japan, this is, as yet, an undercommercialized area. The question is whether Japan could ever become home to an America-like option-oriented lifestyle. This is an issue of whether culture or fixed stages of socio-cultural development are determinative in societal activity.

Without question, socio-cultural difference can be traced to a frame of mind: a mentality about health permeating the society. The health/fitness impulse is deeply rooted in American consciousness and is relatively absent from Japanese view. American ads treat the body as a severe object to be treated, nurtured, built and developed. Japanese ads lack this focus. One indicator that this is true comes from an improbable source: pet ads. In America we find great emphasis on “this product is good for your dog”; in Japan the appeal is merely “this product is what my dog likes”. In Japanese ads, taste, not nutrition, is emphasized.

**H4: Socio-cultural Patterns of Presentation**

Pronounced tendencies in the presentation of the body were speculated to exist and, indeed, were found. These tendencies were generally common to both commercial cultures, with local variation on each theme.

**Gendered Display.** Mirroring Rutherford (1994), our data revealed that women were displayed more often than men in bodily terms. American males, in turn, were bodily represented far more than their Japanese counterparts. Most often, these presentations emphasized torsos—rippling abdominal muscles, hairy chests, biceps and thick shoulders. Japanese males—far less muscular—exposed their bodies only in the bath. This is not surprising: there being a deep cultural significance attached to the *furo* in Japan (Halloran 1969: 220).

**Fragmentation.** One emphasis in postmodern discourse has been the piecemeal presentation of the body.\(^\text{14}\) Our data revealed extensive body fragmentation (Plate 7). As with gendered display, women were fragmented more than men; American men, more than Japanese men. As for what was partialized, Japanese ads overwhelmingly emphasize women’s shoulders and necks—likely due to the historic-cultural significance of unaji; American ads isolate women’s torsos (hips and breasts)—undoubtedly due to the centrality of European conceptions of body rooted in American culture.\(^\text{15}\)

**Size.** In terms of contour, national similarity was greater than difference. Slim is still in. Obesity is unacceptable. Only in the case of *sumo*—a high social status occupation in Japan requiring bulk—was weight treated positively. In both countries, bulk is generally derided (Plate 8). In Japan, for instance, only foreigners were presented as large, and always as bumbling or jolly. In America, there was zero-tolerance for fat figures. Excess weight was a condition to be overcome. A representative example is the “Weight Watchers” ads in which successful graduates break through enlarged photos of their previous rotund selves. The clear message: “that is how I was, but I have terminated that self.” These ads remind us of Simmel’s claim that negation is the sole technique by

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\(^\text{13}\)As just one example, Coca-Cola boasts the following sub-types: Coke, Coke Classic, Diet Coke, Caffeine-free Diet Coke.

\(^\text{14}\)This is not exclusively postmodern. Goffman long ago observed how different cultures tend to ritually segment the body differentially (1956; noted in Ardner 1987: 114).

\(^\text{15}\)Berger (1972) provides sustained evidence of this “way of seeing” in Euro-American culture.

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**PLATE 5: Keeping the Body Subject.** (Clockwise, L To R: Japan: Diajenne underwear; Diet Stevia sports drink; Norvitz GT series: body shaping; Shiseido: deodorant; Korac anti-constipation pill; Japanese Federation for Beans; America: Bally sports clubs; Nordic Track: exercise machine; Formulartrim 3000: diet pills; Sure deodorant; Oxy 10 acne treatment; Hair club for men).
PLATE 6: The Nurtured Body. (Clockwise, from top left: Japan: Takeda: non-oil mayonnaise; Nippon Ham: Calorie soft; Ohata: Calcium bar; Calorie Mate; Diet Coke; Diet Stevia sports drink; America: Ultra Slim Fast: Liquid meal; Miller Lite: beer; Pringles: Potato chips; Special K: cereal; Crystal Light diet drink; Diet Pepsi; Diet Coke; Alpine Lace: cream cheese; Cool Whip: whip.

The Japanese Cultural Connection: male torsos; female necks, shoulders and backs

America Fragmented: male torsos; female hips and breasts

PLATE 7: The Nude Body: selective skin is in. (Clockwise, from top left: Japan: Magic Clean bath scrub; Coca-Cola; Tohoku Electric; Iwanumaya Hotel; Suntory: VSOP brandy; Hitachi: With Me word processor; America: Secret deodorant; Fruit of the Loom underwear; Wisk detergent; JC Penney; Lever 2000 soap; Hanes underwear).

which unity or common solution can be identified and realized (1950: 396). Through negation a “consumption community” (Boorstin 1973) or “taste groupings” (Leiss et al. 1990) is identified, a means of action envisioned.

As for other proportions, height was preferred. Women in Japan tended to be leggy—with that part of the anatomy accentuated by the camera. Men, befitting the cultural trend for sankou (the three highs), were tall. These representations less mirror the typical Japanese body type than project preference. Americans, more often tall, present long lines in ads as a commercialized ideal.

Foods. In support of size, certain eating habits (e.g. vitamins, diet foods) received positive evaluation. Examples run off the page. In Japan, for instance, an ad for ham extols its decreased salt content. An ad for non-oil dressing is built around showing the great decrease in waist size when a woman tugs on her belt. A third ad declares food fat to be “mankind’s biggest enemy”. American ads—especially for breakfast cereals—are virtually identical in thrust.

Fads. One component of such presentation is fadism. Especially in terms of health and fitness, makers are quick to capitalize on the latest craze. Decreased sodium, anti-oxidents, exercise—redefined in terms of walking and aerobic machines—were au courant at the time of our study. Their pervasive presence suggests that whatever is “hot” today is going to be used to commercialize tomorrow’s body.

16I.e. education, salary, height.
Homogeneity versus Heterogeneity. The commercialized body fits within a narrow demographic range in both countries. Despite the wide-spread heterogeneity of American society and accreting heterogeneity in Japan, the body in ads is homogenous. Stated more explicitly: while Japan boasts large Korean and Chinese populations and has experienced an influx in southeast Asians and caucasians over the last decade, the commercialized body remains uni-racial. Other than the random foreigner (generally caucasian) called upon for a celebrity cameo, the body of the Japanese ad almost exclusively suggests a “pure” Japanese. There is no hint of Okinawan features, Ainu features or Korean heritage. When such a non-Yamato type does appear (for instance a Sylvester Stallone or a Chinese woman in a field of wheat) it is only for effect: to forge an association between signifier and signified or position the signified (the product) by utilizing a high-visibility or unique signifier. Most importantly, the purpose in invoking such symbols is never to forge a consumption community, nor to widen the socio-cultural field. Consequently, cultural myths concerning body image and preference remain intact. The situation is no different in the United States, where Asian-, Latin- and African-American bodies are conspicuously absent from commercial presentation.18

Age: Battleground or Frontier? One exception to the homogeneity trend is age. While advertising tends to utilize young models and aim at appealing to the young (see Wolf 1990: 83; Featherstone and Hepworth 1980), a large number of American ads featured elder actors and dealt with age-related themes. In particular, there were assorted ads for heat rub, calcium-enhanced vitamins and pain relievers. Elderly role models are even included in ads for fitness products, such as walking shoes. This is in contrast to Japan, which—although a quickly greying society—still plays to and depicts baby boomers. It should be expected that this tendency would soon change, coming to reflect two types of body in Japan: youthful and aging.

Sexism and Sexuality. It is neither original nor surprising to conclude that ads in both countries are sexist. However, closer scrutiny suggests a distinct difference: Japanese ads treat the body in a “merely sexist” manner; American ads dress sexism in the garb of sexuality (Plate 9). Moreover (perhaps because of this), American ads are more inclined to utilize male bodies in service of sale.

Still and all, though, it is women who are most often packaged in highly compromising, objectified poses. And this is more often the case in Japanese ads. Tight-fitting skirts, crotch-shots, upward angles, pan and zoom shots, full-body scans, isolating sexual organs, and considerable nudity—this is the repetitive sexist discourse in Japan.

Soap ads are instructive in this regard (Plate 10). While American productions emphasize explanation, Japanese soap ads are treated as pin-up photo-ops. Invariably, women are “caught” in the application act; the product, itself, serves as an excuse to show skin. By contrast, in America, if skin is bared, it is just as likely to be that of a male or child. Importantly, when a woman is depicted, it is more likely a face rather than a torso, leg or back getting lathered.

This does not mean that American ads shun female skin. The gratuitous exposure of the body is present in

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17This is a staple strategy in advertising, according to Williamson (1978).

18This is not a paper that can conclude about effects. One would, infer, however, that the over-abundance of a particular body type (and the invisibility of other types) sends clear messages to the viewer about what is normal, acceptable—even ideal—and what is less so.
both countries (Plate 11). The difference, however, is that American ads appear to operate on a "contextually-appropriate" rule: skin only related to product use. By contrast, Japanese ads seem to employ a "body-first" principle: skin whenever and however it can be fit in. Justification (in terms of establishing a relationship between body and product) appears less an imperative in Japan. Simply, a large number of ads show women in various stages of undress performing activities that bear virtually no connection to the product.

In the United States, sexism is certainly present—if not pervasive. However, it generally fits within a logical context. Bathing suits appear in ads for a water-based fun park; weight reduction centers show tighter-fitting clothes following treatment; health and recreation centers focus on muscles and leotards. Gratuitous views of the body, yes; yet justifiable. In such a way the western preference for rationalization is assuaged; western guilt over gratuity is eliminated.

Summary

In terms of perception and presentation of the body both countries manifested similar ideational approaches to the body, with slight local variation. Such differences appear due to three factors: (1) historical influences, (2) cultural values concerning attractiveness and perfection in bodily form, and (3) stages of socio-cultural development. All findings are summarized in Table 2.

Four differences stand out which appear telling about the parent societies. We will highlight these before concluding.

The Body as Instrument for Public Discourse. In the United States bodies appear to serve as symbols of physical wellness and illness. In this way the body is prod for discussions of medical issues and health concerns, such as mammograms, stroke, AIDS, drug use and childhood pregnancy. No comparable use of the body could be found in our Japanese sample. Most remarkable about such usage is that it transports the body outside of the economic realm, positioning it in the political, moral and social space of society.

The Perfect Versus the Possible (Plate 12). In America, bodies were depicted as ideal; in Japan, average. This
PLATE 11: Splitting Sexist Hairs: gratuitous versus contextually-appropriate presentations of the body. (Clockwise, from top left: Japan: Visine: eye drops; Picnic: drink; Honda: Legend car; Oasix: water softener; Hitachi: surf and snow video camera; 7-11 catalogue shopping; America: Chic jeans; Hanes underwear; Fruit of the Loom: casual clothes; Spirit soap; Cool Whip lite whipped cream; Wild World: water park).

Table 2: The findings summarized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. General Summary: both societies treat the body as an object of attention, provocation and desire. In ads it is attractive, free of disability, young and vigorous. These images are limited in scope and repetitious; they appear in a variety of settings and in connection with a large array of products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Common strategies in body presentation (H1):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Examples: pleasure, pain, exercise, diet, sexism, body enhancement, altered representation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The body treated as a commercial vehicle in both societies (H3):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* there is a large capital-commercial component to body symbolization and presentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* body used to reproduce and support the economic system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Socio-cultural patterns of presentation (H4):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Common patterns: gendered display, fragmentation, size, foods, fads, homogeneity, ageism, sexism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differences</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. General Summary: differences in the two societies commercial treatment of the body appear due to (1) historical influences on body perception, (2) cultural values concerning attractiveness and perfection and (3) stages of socio-cultural development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Local variation in the degree and nature of presentation (H1):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* The leisure lifestyle (the American body actively in pursuit of rest and relaxation).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* the American body as a mass athletic instrument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* The body under control: making the body commercially subject is widely practiced in America; less apparent in Japan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* The nurtured body: America’s multi-choice context suggest stages of socio-cultural development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* The body as instrument for public discourse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Positioning and (Second order) Perception (H2):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* higher intentional use in America.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* fragmentation of the body is greater in America.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* American emphasis on health and fitness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* American emphasis on the perfect body; Japanese emphasis on the possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Japanese ads often humanize technology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* American bodies are in greater motion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Socio-cultural patterns of presentation (H4):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Gendered display: women more than men; American men more than Japanese men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Fragmentation: women more than men; American men more than Japanese men. Japanese shoulders and necks; American torsos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Ageism: American ads show grey; Japanese ads ignore it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Sexism: Japanese ads are “merely sexist”; American ads dress sexism in the garb of sexuality. Gratuitous versus contextually appropriate sexism also present.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

difference is significant. America’s commercialized body stands a world apart; beyond the average human’s reach. Japan’s, by contrast, is attainable; a body the workaday viewer possesses. Viewed through the social construction lens, these approaches communicate clear messages concerning limits and prospects. While the American body appears beyond a viewer’s grasp, it offers a window to a glorious illusion. “You, too, can be this . . .
dare to dream,” the ad says. By contrast, in Japan illusion is eschewed in favor of the actual. Only possible lifestyles are depicted; we spy only selves within reach.

The only exception to this is when westerners appear in Japanese ads. In such cases the full, overdeveloped, “dare to dream” body will appear, as will a tendency to show more skin than when Japanese models are used (Plate 13).

This differential view of limits communicates a great deal to us about the world consuming the consumer. The rival images communicate what a viewer’s place, actions and hopes can and should be in the two societies. In America, such views of the body may stimulate aspiration, while in Japan they may mitigate against it.

Transforming Bodies (Plate 14). One exception to modest possibility in Japan lies in the tendency to depict the body in non-human form. A woman turns into a sleek cat; sand morphs into a singing face; a foot becomes a powerful machine; an athlete evolves into a cyborg; a body dissolves into supple water. In America, by contrast, it is alternative representation and imaging that defines the body. A lunchbox is a mouth, another mouth becomes a cereal bowl, a disembodied face lives in a mirror, a twisting string becomes a dancing woman, a glove serves as a waiter, toothpaste makes words turn into a smile.

While Japanese ads play up the technological angle, both countries invoke what Featherstone (1991) calls the “machine metaphor for the body.” This perspective certainly has its dehumanizing dimension; most of all, though, it reinforces the view that bodies are inherently fallible and break down. Ads tell us that “like cars and other consumer goods bodies require servicing, regular care and attention to preserve maximum efficiency” (ibid.: 182). In both America and Japan, pardon the pun, the body is a vehicle for persuasive communication.

 Bodies in Motion. We have already noted that the commercialized body is active. We have also seen that the nature of activity tells us about deep-seated cultural myths: the difference between work versus play, for instance. At the societal level, a body in motion holds different significance, as well. In Japan, motion serves a purely functional purpose: the primary aim is to spur sale. For instance, the man dives into the water and his hair implant stays in place; two rugged males struggle to stay atop the barrelling locomotive—without the aid of their vitamin drink it would be impossible. Situations are contrived to underscore satisfaction of the body’s wants or needs. In this way the body serves commercial ends. This differs from ads depicting activity for reasons other than sale. Active lifestyle, as a way of being, is endemic in American advertising precisely because it is endemic in American life. Its constant presentation in ads not only reinforces this bodily orientation, it serves to reproduce the social condition.

In Japan: the
workaday body

In America: the
exceptional body

PLATE 12: Making Socio-cultural Distinctions: two body types. (Clockwise, from top left: Japan: Central Sports Club; Kirin beer; Muse soap; Karakami kankou: chain hotel; Koraku anti-constipation pill; Gym deodorant; American: Wisk detergent; Hanes underwear; Lever 2000; Diet Pepsi; Alpine Lace: fat free cream cheese; Bally’s: sports club).

PLATE 13: The Japanese exception: the foreign exceptional body. (From left to right: Picnic drink; Hitachi: air conditioner; Lark cigarettes; Calbee: potato chips; Diet Stevia: Drink; Virginia Slims: cigarettes).
Conclusion

This research sought to discover what part, if any, of society’s discourse is built around body consciousness. Beyond this, to the degree that it is, what specific images and meanings constitute this discourse. By studying this question comparatively we sought to discover the degree to which bodily discourse exceeds or is bounded within particular socio-cultural contexts. Key themes embedded in this work have been the convergence of culture, the power of commercial media, the centrality of societal images concerning identity and personal behavior, and the emerging importance of the body as a signifier in contemporary society.

In each respect, associations have been uncovered. Clearly, the body is viewed in roughly similar terms in American and Japanese television commercials. In both contexts, body is presented as attractive, healthy, fit, active, young and vigorous. Moreover, these images are narrowly circumscribed and repetitious: continually reappearing in portrayals often identical and, otherwise, more similar than different in a variety of settings and in connection with a wide array of products in both societies. These findings suggest that a social reproductive function is at work. Consumers tend to be assailed by the same images of the commercialized body in two very different socio-cultural contexts.

Next Steps, New Directions

Three Study Areas. This research has been exploratory. In order to fully understand the relationship between body, mediation and societal reconstruction—what I call the commercialization of the body—a number of avenues should be explored. Perhaps most obviously, exploration of the actual values and practices of those subjected to media messages. The uses to which audiences put texts is a burgeoning area of cultural studies (e.g. Lewis 1992, Jenkins 1991). Whether (and, if so, how) audiences interpret and act on the commercialized body is a goal of such research.

A second area to explore is societal convergence. Utilizing indicators pertaining to health, social practices and appearance, a less traditional approach to this long-standing theoretical concern of Mill, Marx and Engels and
Toqueville is suggested. Historically, Japan and the United States have differed along socio-cultural dimensions. However, with repeated commercialization of body will this distinction persist?

A third area of study turns a traditional media studies focus on its head. Rather than studying messages as their source (ad institution) of terminus (consumption), we would look at bodily images in their reproductive capacity. Like Kellner (1995) we would study society’s emerging dependance on image, style and look as a means of defining identity. Body would be treated in relation to identity creation, maintenance and change.

**Body in Support of System**

It cannot be denied that the present conception of body—that is, the commercialized body we have witnessed on these pages—has been formulated and institutionalized in particular because of the present form of society in which we live: capital-based, commercial, media-centered. In this way, political economy and social reproductive processes associated with culture join hands to forge our visions of body. If we do as Fiske (1989) argues (i.e. look to the historically and socially-located meanings embedded in the text), it should not surprise us that: (1) there is a large capital-commercial component in bodily presentation in advertising, and (2) there are distinctive cultural differences in the American and Japanese commercialization of the body.

Nor should it surprise us that the dominant visions of the body are those calculated to secure support for the system that produces such statement. This is after all, a major function of advertising and, apparently, its most effective aspect. In the main, we are talking about images of bodies selected to appeal to the largest number of people. That is advertising’s purpose: creating and speaking to “consumption communities”. Such communities are not delivered wholesale. They are constructed by “addressing” the individual intentionally; inviting him or her to identify with the product; linking identity with consumption. In the aggregation of such individually-defined, micro-situated transactions, consumers are forged into a collective unit.

At the same time, dissonant images are also present in ad culture. Indeed, as a public becomes more numb, more insulated from ad messages, jarring images (such as those employed by Benetton) or alternative tacks are necessary to make the same point. Thus we encounter alternate depictions of body—such as unhealthy or disabled bodies—in a handful of ads. Here we are not talking about negative symbols—stigmatized bodies used as the “before” image to make the “after” effect more powerful. This is the deviant case employed as positive symbol (Plate 15). Such symbols, only seen infrequently in America, share with all other (healthier, conventionally attractive) bodies a key commonality: the goal of furthering commercial ends.

**The Body Agenda**

One message of this paper is the univocal way in which media reflects and generates body-centered values. Until now, little empirical work has been conducted on the commercialization of the body; certainly not in a comparative context. This despite the fact that body-centered images are pervasive in society. If nothing else, our research has demonstrated such ubiquity.

Despite a spotty history of effect, media is generally believed to be powerful as socializer, orients and framer (MacBride Commission 1980). I have referred to this as advertising’s agenda setting function (Holden 1993, 1995). Like any other institutional communication medium, advertising tells us what people, ideas and activities are important (and, by implication, which are not) in what way and to what degree. In the case of the body, we

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19Thus goes the current evaluation of ad effect. From a numbingly long list see Schudson (1984), Dyer (1982), and Klein, Leiss and Jay (1986).

20Williamson (1978) makes this point in a reassessment of advertising over the past decade. It has become more reflexive, and taken an academically-informed, semiotic-conscious turn.
can paraphrase Cohen (1963): advertising is “stunningly successful” at telling us what we ought to regard and what to ignore. We are told just how to view the body—in what ways, from what angles, through which lenses, in which situations.

This is the key characteristic of information society. Defined by message content, it repeatedly addresses us, it continually situates us via its signals. It speaks to us: (1) through commercial media, (2) as consumers, (3) whose identity is increasingly tied to and expressed bodily; which is (4) increasingly defined and shaped by the messages from its media. There should be little dispute: the status accorded the body by vehicles of commercial communication is of increasingly central import.

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