Extended Essay in Group 1: English: Category 3: Studies in Language

The Portrayal of Women in Samsung Television Commercials: A Reflection of Traditional Korean Confucian Beliefs of Women Gender Roles

XXXXX    XXXXX

Candidate Number: 000166-0044

Seoul Foreign School, South Korea

Word Count: 3270

May 2014 Exam Session
Abstract

This academic paper will address the following question: “To what extent does the representation of women in Samsung’s commercials for an English speaking audience in the U.S market reflect traditional Korean beliefs of women’s roles?” The response to this question consists of an in-depth analysis of the representation of women in Samsung’s commercials and was guided by the hypothesis that Korean culture, specifically Confucian beliefs, has significantly influenced Samsung’s advertising strategies as a South Korean company, despite the target audience being non-Korean.

I focused on several Samsung commercials in English that appeared on television in the U.S between 2006 and 2013. With a comprehensive analysis of advertising techniques such as mise-en-scéne including camera angles, lighting, colors, costume, and music, observations have been made regarding the way in which women are depicted in Samsung’s television advertising. I then connected the Korean Confucian beliefs regarding women to the way in which women were represented in Samsung’s advertisements.

To bolster my argument, the secondary sources that I used for this essay include scholarly articles, documentaries, and studies regarding gender stereotypes, Korean Confucian culture, and the general impact of culture on a company’s advertising. The primary sources that I have chosen and thoroughly analyzed include a range of the release dates of Samsung advertisements from 2003 to 2013 in order to substantiate my claims.

I concluded with the notion that although Samsung is a company that is consistently trying to appeal to the U.S market, the South Korean company remains faithful to its origins: Korean Confucian beliefs. Women are represented as homemakers and generally inferior to men, a concept that is parallel to the way in which Confucianism perceives women. Over time, Samsung has shown to adjust its commercials to fit modern Western values but continues to remain reflective of Korean Confucianism.

Word Count: 300
# Table of Contents

Abstract  
I. Introduction  
II. Brief Context of Samsung and Confucianism  
III. Roles Played by Women in Samsung’s Commercials  
IV. Product Association  
V. Mise-en-scène (Camera Focus)  
VI. Mise-en-scène (Clothing of Women)  
VII. Mise-en-scène (Colors/Lighting)  
VIII. Music  
IX. Conclusion  
X. Works Cited
I. Introduction

In attempt to sell their products, advertisers in companies create television commercials that appeal to their target consumers. Additionally, advertisements and commercials are “part of the social and cultural systems in which they exist” (Kim). The South Korean multinational company, Samsung, is one of the many big corporations that heavily rely on television advertising to persuade their viewers. In spite of the fact that most Samsung advertisements in English have been created by U.S advertising agencies, the company’s approach to marketing is a reflection of its origin’s culture: South Korea.

In regard to the fact that Korea has integrated Confucianism into its cultural identity, this essay will focus on the effect of culture on Samsung’s advertising techniques for the U.S market, granted that Samsung is a South Korean company. More specifically, although Samsung is a Korean company, how and to what extent are Korean Confucian beliefs of women reflected in Samsung’s portrayal of women in Samsung’s television commercials targeted for a U.S audience?

The general roles played by women, product association, and the filming techniques, such as mis en scène used in Samsung’s television commercials illustrate the prevalence of Korean Confucian beliefs of women being inferior to men. Although it is evident that Samsung has gradually adapted to the modern perception of Women in the U.S for its U.S audience, Samsung’s television commercials have shown to continue to embed the ideals of Korean Confucianism regarding female roles in society. Samsung remains loyal to depicting women as homemakers, vulnerable, sex objects, and dependable, which also follow the codes of “femininity,” ideas that are also relevant to Western society (Jhally). This essay will be focusing on several Samsung television commercials for the U.S market that range from release dates from 2003 to 2013 for products such as the Galaxy Tab, OLED television, Samsung laptops, phone products, and the Samsung Navibot. These advertisements are examples of ways in which Samsung perceives women, as Korean company of Confucian beliefs.

II. Brief Context of Samsung and Confucianism

During 1980-1989, South Korean company Samsung has focused on entering the global marketplace as a competitor amongst technology companies, first advertising and exporting their products to the United States (“History”). As Samsung continued and is
continuing to compete for the best title and reputation and is now in fact notably a “premium, world-class brand,” a great deal of money has been used to create advertisements and television commercials that appeal to the U.S market (Roll).

Despite Samsung being a South Korean company working towards appealing to the U.S market, the company has not completely abandoned Korean traditional beliefs, or Confucianism, when creating television commercials for a U.S audience. Adapted to Confucianism, Korean culture highly emphasizes the importance of an individual’s role in society according to his or her identity and class (Kee). Samsung Electronics presents women in a way that is generally reflective of Korea’s Confucian beliefs that women hold an inferior position to men (Deuchler). Confucianism, based on the philosophy of Chinese philosopher Confucius, is centered on ethical issues regarding social construction and relationships (Cartwright). More specifically, “it regards the union between man and woman as the root of all human relations” (Deuchler).

Confucian social beliefs were officially adopted at the beginning of the Choson Dynasty during 1392-1910 of Korea and “lastingly transformed the Korean social scene” when Confucianism “reached the Korean peninsula” after initially being a part of Chinese culture (Deuchler). According to Confucian beliefs, the woman is part of the inner sphere, or the yin/earth, and the male is part of the outer sphere, or the heaven/yang. In other words, “male has precedence over female” (Deuchler). The woman is expected to be submissive and obey the orders of her superiors, who are essentially males. However, in contrast, she is expected to take leadership in the domestic aspects, such as household chores. Thus, she is held responsible for the “domestic peace” depending on how she “exerts authority” (Deuchler).

The stereotypes of women that are used in television commercials can be seen to allude to Korean Confucian ideals of women. While men are typically portrayed as “ambitious, hard working, responsible, and dependable,” women are depicted as being “caring, emotional, needing guidance and support, and weak” all of which are traits that the woman in a Confucian society are expected to have (Pillay). Although Samsung’s advertisers do not utilize Confucianism to its most extreme extent in terms of representing patriarchy in advertisements made for the US market, they embed Confucian beliefs by emphasizing the dominance of males in contrast to females. However, the dearth of women playing leading roles in Samsung’s advertisements still remains a reflection of Korean society, which “has been described as an extreme form of patriarchy,” a possible explanation to the excess use of male protagonists in the work place setting in Samsung’s television ads (Cho).
III. Roles Played by Women in Samsung’s Commercials

The most evident aspect of Samsung’s television commercials of the Confucian perception of women’s roles is the actual roles that women have been given to play. These roles include caring for a child, being in the kitchen, cleaner or housemaid, being sex objects, and opportunists.

Of the many social roles that women have been given, the female characters of Samsung’s commercials have consistently been rendered as the caregivers and homemakers, as shown in their campaigns such as the Samsung MP3 Player in 2008, Samsung Navibot in 2010, and the Galaxy Tab campaign produced and released in 2011. In the 2008 advertisement, a busy city is depicted with both male and female characters. The advertisement begins with a couple interacting and later shows a woman pushing a child in a stroller, as can be seen in Figure 1. By associating the woman in this commercial with the child in a stroller, viewers may see that Samsung is reinforcing Confucian beliefs of women being the caregivers. With an “extreme emphasis on motherhood,” Confucianism focused on the structure of the family by emphasizing that women are expected to be highly associated with the child (Slote).

![Figure 1](image)

Although Samsung manages to balance the presence of both males and females, Samsung further reinforces the notion that the female is more likely to be more responsible for taking care of the child by specifically associating a female character with the stroller outside.
Samsung also suggests that women are meant for the household by making female protagonists associated with household items and duties such as cooking or cleaning.

A more recent commercial than the MP3 player, Samsung’s campaign of Galaxy Tab in 2011 further suggests the roles of women by associating the women with cooking. The juxtaposition of men who use the Galaxy Tab in the workplace and women who use the Galaxy Tab in the kitchen in this commercial clearly implies that the expected social role of women is to be in charge of the cooking in the house. While the men are shown happy at work posing with the product (Figure 2), the women are, in contrast, cooking at home and interacting with each other (Figure 3). The advertisement is full of lively, bright colors throughout with very upbeat and animated music in the background, thus attempts to positively depict these given gender roles.

Parallel to Korean traditional Confucian beliefs of women, according to Goffman’s theory of the Arrangement of the Sexes, women have traditionally been linked to “personal servicing such as teaching, inn keeping, nursing, food handling” in society (Goffman 313). One of the main reasons why women have often been associated with household duties is because women give birth to children biologically. In a Confucian society, one of the main reasons behind the emphasis of motherhood is that, clearly, the mother is in the position to breastfeed and spend more time with the baby and thus, men tend to find the women responsible for taking care of the child and for cleaning the house while men have the “responsibility” of working outside the house. Given the image of women as caregivers and
homemakers, Samsung bolsters the popular stereotype of women being fully responsible for the duties at home, including taking care of the child.

Women are also portrayed as the cleaners or housemaids, as part of their “assumed domestic responsibility” (Deuchler). Again, reinforcing the notion that women are “inferior to men” and hold “leadership in the domestic realm,” women have been portrayed as in charge of the cleaning of the house or having subordinate roles to men (Deuchler). In Samsung’s television commercial for the Samsung Smart TV released in April of 2013, there is one female character in housemaid attire. In Figure 4, she is happily cleaning her master’s house. The fact that she is happy, also shown in Figure 5, although is completing a domestic task, bolsters the Confucian ideal that although women were to be seen as subordinate, they saw their duties as being a “heavy responsibility” that “directly correlated with the rise and fall of the dynasty” (Deuchler).

Not only does Samsung portray women in their commercials as responsible for household and nurturing duties, but they also characterize them as being “gold diggers” or opportunists, implying that women are dependent of men. The women in several Samsung commercials have been illustrated as ones who are highly impressed with men who have money, fame, and the best technology. Because women are often illustrated as unassertive and submissive, two traits that are assumed of Confucian women, they are also shown to be overly dependent on their male counterparts (Furnham). Nevertheless, women are also portrayed as compliant and somewhat obedient to the men as long as they know that they can rely on the men emotionally and for money. An example of this would be Samsung’s campaign for their Flexible Display product, which was released in 2013. This commercial is set in a café with one woman sitting in the middle of two men on each of her side (Shown in
Two completely different male characters are positioned together to show a contrast in technologies, with the woman in the middle who seems to be very interested in the newest technology. Having the newest technology may be an indicator of wealth. Thus, as expected, the woman shows more interest in the male character with the newest technology rather than in the one with the old fashioned tablet because she may have been quick to recognize that having the newest technology may have resulted from an opulent lifestyle.

IV. Product Association

Another way in which Samsung has shown to remain loyal in adhering to Confucianism is through its product association, which “refers to the product types that are stereotypically associated with each sex” (Pillay). The products that are associated to men and to women clearly distinguish their supposed roles that correspond to Confucian beliefs of gender roles.

In Figure 7, the Samsung Navibot, or robot cleaner, is associated with a woman.
By associating a woman with Samsung’s product, the Navibot, Samsung implies that women are the target consumers for this Samsung Navibot. Essentially, with this Navibot robot cleaner, the company suggests that women can live simpler, easier lives, as demonstrated in figure 6, because they can avoid cleaning, an assumed task for them to complete. Thus, the underlying message is that women are assumed to be in charge of household tasks, as believed in a Confucian society.

In juxtaposition, products such as computers have often been associated more with men in Samsung’s television commercials, therefore reinforcing the notion that men are meant to have an “‘outer’ or public sphere” in contrast to women because they are expected to be at the workplace. Figure 8 is a shot taken from Samsung’s television commercial for the ATIV tablet of a male office worker using the tablet for a presentation.

In this commercial, the male protagonist promotes and advertises this product to target consumers of men in the workplace. Therefore, this bolsters the notion that men have the responsibility of being the ‘bread-winners’ and be in the “public sphere” while the women are in the “inner sphere” of the household (Deuchler).

V. Mise-en-scéné (Camera Focus)

In addition to the roles of women and product association with different genders in Samsung’s commercials, the mise-en-scéné, or scenery arrangement, must also be analyzed as an aspect of the conformity to Confucian beliefs in the advertisements. The camera angles and focus will be discussed in this section of this essay.
Another way Samsung utilizes Confucian beliefs of the roles of women is represented in the camera angles and focus, with the eyes of the viewers drawn to the male(s) of the commercial. For example, Samsung’s commercial of the Samsung laptop, published in May 2012, focuses on the male protagonist. Although the male character is clearly outnumbered by females in the commercial, the viewers are positioned to have their eyes fixated on the male throughout.

In figure 9, the two female characters are not even shown in the frame, so the viewers are positioned to only focus on the male. In addition, although females in the frame in figure 10 outnumber the male, the male is still the focus of the scene. The lack of focus on the female characters illustrate Samsung’s attitude towards women being inferior to men, which also corresponds to the Confucian ideals of male superiority. In figure 9, again, it is also evident that women are objectified, with the two women next to both sides of the male, thus reinforcing the notion that women are lower than men in terms of social hierarchy.

![Figure 9](image1.png) ![Figure 10](image2.png)

It is also essential to note that when the camera focuses on females, the stereotypical slim body shape is emphasized, thus contributing to the reinforcement of the ‘vulnerability’ and objectification of women. The women in Samsung’s commercials generally tend to have very slim bodies, which may add to the vulnerable image of women. They are also placed in fragile and vulnerable positions, shown in figure 11. This commercial is for a Samsung phone released in 2003.

The way her arms and legs are positioned on the car puts her into a very weak position, making her available for any physical attack. According to the Codes of Gender, the female body is typically tilted with less power in the stance, and thus making the body more
vulnerable to any sort of violence (Jhally). However, as she is in this position, the viewers are able to see that this is pleasing to the male character’s eyes. In addition, she is dressed in a very tight and cleavage-revealing dress, as shown in figure 12, which adds to her fragile image. The camera angle in the segment, figure 12, is emphasized on her upper body, which seems to be the most revealing part of her dress. Thus, when women are the protagonists of commercials, the company Samsung focuses on the frame and fragile position of the woman, reinforcing the concept that women are vulnerable, in contrast to the adventurous and strong men that are depicted in Samsung’s television commercials.

![Figure 11](image1.png) ![Figure 12](image2.png)

**VI. Mis-en-scéné (Clothing of Women)**

The clothing, or lack thereof, of women also represents the objectification, or the notion of the inferiority of women. The lack of clothing or revealing clothing illustrates the nature of “female submissiveness” (O’Barr) and creates the impression that they are attainable and vulnerable like material items (Hellemont). The vulnerable appearance of women also contributes to the idea that women are, therefore, inferior to men.

The general trend of women wearing revealing clothes is clearly shown over the range of Samsung’s commercials. An example is figure 13, which is a segment taken from a commercial promoting a Samsung phone released in 2007 starring Beyoncé Knowles. Although Beyoncé is known as a powerful, and independent pop singer, she is wearing very tight and revealing clothing in this commercial. In figure 12, she is wearing a top that is tightly fitted with the neckline cut deep enough to reveal the cleavage. The audience is positioned to focus on the female character in this segment; however, the segment also welcomes men to draw their attention to her cleavage. Thus, this objectifies the female
character of the commercial and essentially makes her the “eye candy” in contrast to the more powerful and dominating male protagonists in Samsung’s television commercials.

![Figure 13](image1)

Figure 13

Not only are the clothes themselves revealing, but Samsung has also used a lack of clothes for the costumes of women in the commercials. In the ATIV advertisement, there is a focus on the male characters; However, when there are females, they are wearing revealing swim suits, depicted in figure 14 and 15. Although the male character is fully clothed, the woman, in juxtaposition to the male character in figure 15, is barely clothed. Nevertheless, women are again portrayed as vulnerable and fragile with the lack of clothing covering their bodies.

![Figure 14](image2)

Figure 14

![Figure 15](image3)

Figure 15
VII. Mise-en-scéné (Colors/Lighting)

The contrast between high-key lighting and low-key lighting used in Samsung’s commercials also depict the distinguishable differences of men and women. While the lighting and colors tend to be bold or dark for men, the lighting and colors used when women are present tend to be soft and light, bolstering the vulnerable and weak image of women (Kim).

For example, the soft colors are evident in figure 16, with pink and light brown tones. The softness of the pink and brown tones in this commercial give a sense of serenity, but also vulnerability, which are two characteristics that are often associated with women.

In contrast, commercials with men tend to have bold and vivid colors to emphasize the “ambitious” nature of men (Pillay). In figure 17, a segment from a 2011 Samsung commercial for the Galaxy S2 phone, “The Way We Were Wired,” the colors of this segment are evidently dark and bold to correspond to the active, running male character in this scene.

With soft colors often being associated with women and bold colors associated with men in Samsung’s commercials, Samsung continues to allude to Confucian ideals of the notable differences between men and women. While men should be dominant and be responsible for the work outside of the household, women are expected to be working within the household in Confucian society.
IX. Music

Lastly, the music used in Samsung’s commercials have reinforced the notion that men and women have significant differences in societal roles, such as men being bold and women being vulnerable.

While the music in the 2007 phone commercial includes the acoustic guitar with a slow, and steady beat, the music in the ATIV commercial has a very mysterious and adventurous tone to it. With the juxtaposition of the music and the film, the audience associates a calm rhythm with the slow walking pace of the female character in the 2007 commercial. Whereas, in the ATIV commercial, the audience associates a fast, upbeat, and gradual development of speed with the male protagonist constantly in action to race to the workplace. Nevertheless, the audience, thus, perceives the male character as being more strong and righteous in contrast to the female character in the 2007 commercial, who can be perceived as calm, and somewhat vulnerable.

X. Conclusion

Despite Samsung’s goal to appeal to the U.S and global market, the company’s cultural values as a South Korean company are clearly reflected in the representation of women. These cultural beliefs of Confucianism make an allusion to the conventional image
of women of being homemakers, insignificant sex objects and opportunists. All in all, women are, according to Confucianism, meant to hold an inferior position to men and this belief has definitely been used in the portrayal of the roles of women, showing that Samsung as a company remains to abide by the traditional South Korean perception of women. Although Samsung does not utilize Confucianism to its most extreme extent in terms of male dominance, they embed Confucian beliefs by emphasizing the differences in roles in society of men and women and giving the males more active roles than those of women.

Over time, as seen in the commercials ranging from those released in 2003 to 2013, Samsung has gradually increased the position and significance of the roles of women. However, evidently, there is a loyalty that Samsung feels towards representing traditional Korean beliefs of the perception of women. Samsung ensures to create a balance between keeping within the boundaries of the common perception of women and not appearing sexist in order to appeal to modern Western society’s view of women. This company does so by making a fairly equal number of commercials that have women as the central characters or men as the central characters. There are also exceptions to the gender stereotypes that are used, such as images of men taking care of the children or helping with the housework.

As time progressed, Samsung managed to make the distinction between male and female less distinct. Nevertheless, Samsung is ultimately a South Korean company, and thus, continues to hold on to Korean Confucian ideals regarding gender roles, while attempting to adjust their commercials to accommodate and appeal to the values Western market. In spite of the fact that Samsung is a leading company in electronics worldwide and portrays its reputation as a company that advocates equality amongst men and women, the conforming representation of women to Korean Confucian ideas may indeed be one of the reasons why Samsung’s television advertising has been successful over the years with its ability to stand out as a South Korean company.

Word Count: 3270
X. Works Cited


Kim, Kwangok, and Dennis T. Lowry. "Television Commercials as a Lagging Social


