Television Advertising and Idealized Images
of the “Good Life” among Adolescents in Rural China

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Philosophy

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Hong Kong Baptist University
January 2008
ABSTRACT

This study attempts to explore the effects of television advertising viewing on adolescents in rural China. A theoretical model based on cultivation theory and social comparison theory is constructed. Specifically, this study examines whether heavy viewers of television advertising would overestimate the affluence of society and internalize the materialistic value orientations. It also examines whether rural adolescents engage in social comparison with idealized advertising images of the “good life,” and as a result, lower their evaluation of current living standards.

A sample of 401 rural Chinese adolescents in Henan Province who were aged 12 to 17 and were studying in secondary school Forms 1 to 3 (equivalent to Grades 7 to 10 in the U.S. system) was surveyed in October 2006. Contrary to what is predicted by the cultivation theory, television advertising viewing failed to cultivate beliefs about the prevalence of affluence in society. However, heavy viewers of television advertising endorsed a higher level of materialism. There was no significant correlation between beliefs about the prevalence of affluence and endorsement of materialism. Regression analysis indicated that television advertising viewing, social comparison with idealized advertising images of the “good life” and materialism were positively correlated. Social comparison does not have a significant correlation with rural respondent evaluations of their living standards. In this study, the linkage between cultivation theory and social
comparison theory is partially established. This suggests that the internalization of the materialistic values conveyed by television advertising may be one of the prerequisites of social comparison with advertising images.
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