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SUBHEADLINE: The 22nd Bangkok International Motor Show is a glittering, glamorous love affair with ... well, with what? There are many aspects to one of the largest industries in the world and the Thai market has its own unique take on what is hot and what is not

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Walking the length and breadth of Bangkok's 22nd Motor Show, stamped as 'the grandest and greatest automotive show in South East Asia', there seems to be more to it than a dazzling roundabout of buffed-up and burnished cars: dolled-up leggy presenters and palpable symbols of success. These two latest components called for thought.

On a stage suffused with light, pretty girls in short skirts and figure-hugging tops swayed their hips and swung their heads to the rhythm of Ricky Martin's latest hit She Bangs.

It could be a scene from a show in one of Bangkok's glitzy nightclubs if not for the number of gleaming cars hovering in the background.

At Toyota's Silicon Pavilion and other stalls set up by many other car manufacturers at Bangkok's 22nd Motor Show currently running at the BITEC, lovely lady presenters and professional dancers hired for short performances are just as much a draw as cars themselves.

Not surprising as most of the 1.7 million estimated visitors are male, up to 65 percent according to the organisers. Walking through the 50,600 sq. metres of the exhibition area, men got indeed to feast their eyes not only on the latest and slickest cars \_ presented by some 130 companies from Thailand and 10 other countries, from passenger cars to concept cars, motorcycles, minivans and off roaders \_ but also on young and attractive female presenters, bedecked with immaculate make-up and shiny outfits.

The vehicles' gloss is matched only by their human counterparts glittering appearances and smiles. Female presenters seem to be a must at every stand, their beauty, charm and communication skills adding to the total ``bodywork" and blending with the prevailing mood of elegance and refinement.

In an industry which has crashed headlong into tAsian economic crisis, with sales of cars dropping by more than 70 percent between 1996 and 1997 \_ passing from 550,000 cars sold to 144,000 \_ resorting to this old trick doesn't seem to upset anybody.

``Our presenters are far more than a pretty face and a shapely body. They are very knowledgeable and have gone through an intensive training beforehand," insisted Kantanit Sukontasap, Public Relations General Manager for DaimlerChrysler.

Using young attractive female presenters is a tactic used extensively throughout the world, not just in Thailand said Pitakphan Visetbhakdi, Commercial Director of Peugeot.

``It's a worldwide tradition. After all, the marketing concept of a car is a ``she" anyway (although there has been controversy lately on the subject). So it is like presenting two beauties side by side," he reasoned.

The presenters themselves also insisted they are there for legitimate reasons.

“Cars are the fruit of high technology, synonymous with strength and robustness. Women add a bit of softness to this world and help attract people's attention,” explains Keow, 21, one of the five “Toyota Pretty”. Her four dolled-up buddies nodded their agreement.

“Working as a presenter on the Motor Show is not open just to any pretty face. It's hard work. The minimum level of education required is a bachelor's degree,” comments Nathaporn Puchnay, 24, a former air hostess and presenter for DaimlerChrysler cars, who earns 2,000 baht a day during the show.

She continued: “Nowadays the emphasis is put on general knowledge and language skills. We, presenters are, like all women in today's society, resourceful and multi-talented.”

“Girls have natural charm. This charm is used to attract customers,” explains Kanitha Luangaroonlert, 17, declared this year's Miss Motorshow 2001 by Grand Prix International Co., the show organiser.

While using lovely young things to present cars seems to be the policy all around, not all of exhibiting companies favour the skimpy-outfit tactic to sell their product.

And feminist militants are easy to start off on the subject:

“Women are more and more used as medium to sell all sorts of products from batteries, electrical appliance to banking services. ... By putting cars on sale with pretty girls, it is like you are selling the girls too. I don't think it is appropriate nor necessary. Why isn't the inner quality of the products \_ the cars reliability or durability for example \_ sufficient to attract customers?” said Jaded Chouwilai, a regular visitor of Bangkok's motorshow and coordinator of the Friends of Women Foundation. “Having these young girls concerned only about their beauty and physical appearance is a disservice to them. It is like keeping them trapped in something that is far from essential in life. I hope this prevailing trend will evolve,” he added.

Joseph Barbera, Managing Director of Yontrakit Volkswagen is a stickler to the principle of having female presenters wearing cover-all business suits.

“If you need skimpy outfits to attract people to your cars, it's sleazy. That means there is a problem with your cars!” he said, leaping up with indignation.

“If this is accepted, what's the difference between Soi Nana and the BITEC? It's demeaning. I feel women deserve to be respected,” Joe continued, defending Volkswagen's innovative “Design Driven with Volkswagen” fashion show by Chatri Tengha as presenting neither plunging necklines, nor revealing flesh but professional, work-wearable clothes.

As one of the highlights of the event, Volkswagen's fashion show \_ given as a free gift along the display of the new Beetle “Dune” \_ also had the advantage of tackling the idea of “image”, so dear to the Asian automotive world.

As blatantly appearance-conscious as Thais are, how could this ostentatious sign of status be left to chance? If success and wealth is there, it ought to be shown. And even better paraded, exhibited, brandished \_ the consequences of this naked expression of wealth are enjoyed in every day life and interpersonal relations; barter a 3-million-baht-car against a premium parking space or some other preferential treatment.

“It seems that in Asia, much more than in Europe, what you are is what you display,” comments Pascal Setabutr, Thailand's representative of British Jato Dynamics \_ the market leader in automotive research.

`` The market is somehow distorted here because of a special approach to cars. This might have to do with Asian mind set. Thai society is very much stratified and organised into a hierarchy. People look for markers of class and status in external signs of wealth such as mobile phones, designers clothes, cars. ... All this helps, it is believed, to command respect."

`` It [this fascination for prestigious goods] is actually difficult to explain but I guess it has to do with the Asian idea of face value. You have face when you have a big car," comments Kantanit of DaimlerChrysler. `` People relate to cars with passion. No other goods create such feelings. There are even some people \_ although no Thais so far \_ who ask to be buried in their car," Kantanit said.

Pitakphan from Peugeot comments: `` Thais are fascinated by cars and high technology. Although their knowledge of automotive technology might not be well developed, a car's appearance has to be very appealing. To sell a car here we have to concentrate on the aesthetic appeal, whereas in Germany for example, the emphasis is more on the practical side and the technology," he explained.

`` Image, after sale service and resale value are the three most important concepts in the eyes of Asian customers," Pitakphan said, giving examples of how evanescent the Thai car market is. `` Thais are quite easy to convince. It is most important to keep up with the Jones'. One customer recently purchased a red Peugeot in Surat Thani and following that, we sold numerous red cars. Thais are very appearance centred and fashion-conscious."

It follows that brands or models attached to a label of prestige are doing well and recovering slightly faster from the crisis despite the crushing import duties of around 200 percent (according to the car's engine capacity) for imported cars and around 80 percent for cars assembled in Thailand.

With 2,415 vehicles sold in the year 2000 and more than 750 in the first quarter of 2001 (an increase of almost 40 percent compared to last year), BMW is leading the market of European cars, next to Mercedes Benz (2,356 cars sold in 2000 according to the Thai Automotive Industry Association), and following, Volvo, Volkswagen and Peugeot.

Japanese cars lead the overall market with 27,298 cars sold by Toyota (an increase of 12.4 percent compared to 1999), more than 25,000 for Honda, and nearly 13,000 for Nissan and 3,700 for Mitsubishi.

`` BMW Thailand has impressively confirmed its No.1 position in the luxury car market. From April onwards, starting with this Motor Show, we expect the market to grow. We are still 50 percent below the pre-crisis level. " said Karsten Engel, President of BMW (Thailand) Co, during a fully-packed press conference one hour ahead of the Motor Show official opening.

Far from resting on the brand's prestigious laurels, Engel is of the opinion that their success is mainly based on the product itself. `` Cars are a very good way to express your personality; in our case you can be young at heart and one of those who are pushing the country ahead, into the future," Engel said of BMW, a brand based in Thailand for the past 32 years.

To Engel, the Thai fascination for cars is nothing subliminal but is simply linked to the amount of time spent in the traffic. `` People spend so much time in their cars in Thailand, so it's understandable that they want a car they enjoy sitting in, from which they won't hear the outside noise. I don't think it is anything cultural."

Whereas most cars manufacturers in the West strive to offer vehicles at an increasingly cheaper price, Thailand seems to be witnessing a steady escalation of prices \_ these outrageously expensive wheeled jewels.

`` One keeps playing as long as one wins," says Pascal Setabutr from Jato Dynamics.

Gloomy economic climate or not, increasing import taxes and duties or not, there seems to be a new order in the automotive industry, at least if one believes some young Motor Show addicts.

`` People driving big and expensive cars think they command respect and preferential treatment. But I think that with the increase in education and the resulting changes in mentality, the attitude might evolve," commented Puwadol Sukamalanon, a young food scientist researcher.

`` I think young Thais are on the verge of changing, attached more to concepts such as modern and reliable rather than expensive. It's a question of a customer's maturity I guess," commented Kanitha the latest Miss Motorshow. Only the future will tell.