

**COMMUNICATING GENDER: CONSTRUCTION OF
GENDER IDENTITIES IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN
LIFESTYLE MAGAZINES**

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**COMMUNICATING GENDER: CONSTRUCTION OF
GENDER IDENTITIES IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN
LIFESTYLE MAGAZINES**

by

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KOMUNIKASI GENDER: KONSTRUKSI IDENTITI GENDER DALAM MAJALAH GAYA HIDUP MALAYSIA YANG TERPILIH

ABSTRAK

Kandungan media bukan sahaja mencerminkan perbezaan antara peranan gender malah media juga dapat mempengaruhi gender melalui stereotaip. Kajian ini mengkaji bagaimana enam majalah bertemakan gaya hidup wanita dan lelaki di Malaysia yang diterbitkan pada abad ke-21 menggambarkan peranan gender hari ini. Berpandukan Teori Feminis, analisis teks bagi kedua-dua majalah gaya hidup Bahasa Malaysia dan Bahasa Inggeris seperti *Her World*, *Wanita*, *Nona*, *Maskulin*, *Glam Lelaki* dan *Men's Health* membantu menonjolkan pembinaan identiti gender. Jika majalah ini dapat menggalakkan stereotaip, sekaligus mengukuhkan lagi sistem patriarki yang memberi kesan kepada polisi negara berkaitan wanita dan juga kemajuan mereka. Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk meneliti sama ada majalah-majalah tersebut mencerminkan realiti kemajuan wanita ke arah kesaksamaan dan perubahan terhadap stereotaip peranan lelaki dalam masyarakat masa kini. Gender dalam kajian ini dibincangkan dalam konteks sosial dan budaya Malaysia. Analisis kandungan teks majalah-majalah yang dipilih menunjukkan stereotaip berleluasa terhadap peranan gender dan tidak ketara terhadap kemajuan wanita ke arah kesaksamaan serta kurang menggambarkan evolusi peranan kedua-dua gender di tempat kerja serta di rumah.

**COMMUNICATING GENDER: CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER
IDENTITIES IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN LIFESTYLE MAGAZINES**

ABSTRACT

Since media not only reflects differences between gender roles through its content, but also influences matters on gender with stereotyping. This study examines how six Malaysian women and men's lifestyle magazines published in the twenty-first century portray gender roles today. Guided by feminist theories, the textual analysis of both Bahasa Malaysia and English language lifestyle magazines of *Her World*, *Wanita*, *Nona*, *Maskulin*, *Glam Lelaki* and *Men's Health* helps uncover how gender identities are constructed and if these magazines promote stereotypes that uphold a patriarchal system that affects national policies pertaining to women and their progress. This study also aims to discover if these magazines reflect the reality of women's advancement toward equality and the inevitable change of male gender role in society. Gender in this study is discussed in relation to Malaysian social and cultural contexts. The analysis of the selected magazines' textual content shows rampant stereotyping of gender roles and very little of women's notable advancement toward equality as well as the evolution of both gender roles at work and at home.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Media dominates our lives every single day and each waking hour through multiple platforms. With the advancement of social media – Internet, Facebook, Twitter, blogs – our lives are almost controlled by media in addition to the current traditional media such as television, films, magazines and advertisements (Azman, Hashim, Endut & Aziz, 2016). Media represents everybody and everything. Scholars who study media discover that most people rely on media to craft their opinions, identities and lives (Calvert, 1999; Croteau & Hoynes, 1999). Media, according to Connell (1985) is an effective way to influence and change one's everyday, unmediated life.

A vital concern for many is media's treatment on gender issues and for those advocates of human rights view detrimental treatment of women as one of the major impediments in achieving gender equality (Azman et al, 2016). Women, Yusuf and Duasa (2010) as well as Azman et al (2016) observe, have been contributing considerably to Malaysia's development and economic growth since its independence in 1957. The issues of media's treatment of women can be linked to the larger issues of the political economy of the media which is fundamentally dealing with issues of structures that are prominent as determinants of capitalism and class inequalities (Mosco, 1996).

This is because political economy questions the existing social system especially its inequalities while gender, media and power are intertwined (Azman et al, 2016). In the

case of Malaysia, patriarchal foundation of its society hinders equal treatment of women and gendered societal structure naturally extended to other socio-political structures including the Malaysian media that is heavily influenced by the political dynamics of the ruling coalition. The gendered characteristics of the coalition are clearly reflected in the organisation of the media (Azman et al, 2016). Furthermore, media is more interested in women as consumers where extended commercialisation enhances the stereotypical images of women in the media (Fung, 2002; Azman et al, 2016; Furat & Sonmez, 2013).

It's evident that media's reflections in terms of gender identity, gender roles and gender equality show many contradictions to the advancement, specifically, of women's roles, identity and equality in society. This study aims to discover if it's realistic to say that media's constructions of gender is progressing toward a positive direction. Wood (2001) points out examples of portrayals of women as sex objects and men as sexual aggressors that are found in music videos shown on MTV and other stations, and how media induces us to think we should measure up to superficial standards as well as makes us see normal bodies and bodily functions as pathologies.

Media deflates the development of gender roles for men too, where metrosexuality inspires men's willingness to openly disclose emotions, contribute more to what is considered as female work such as household chores as well as bringing up children and, hence, slowly but steadily eliminating traditional stereotypes that are born out of a patriarchal society. The twenty-first century is an interesting, if not turbulent, time for gender identity and sexuality in general. West and Zimmerman (1987) reflect how gender is established by means of interaction, something that is created by an organised social performance.

Some gender stereotypes about setting, product promotion and voice-over have persisted in primetime commercials but to date, there are some significant changes where an equal number of men and women are depicted in commercials in Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia and the United States (Bresnahan, Liu & Nishida, 2001).

Malaysian media only portrays what is acceptable by society, which are stereotypes in terms of gender roles. Lifestyle magazines, in particular, hold the power in shaping what societies perceive as the acceptable gender identities of today (Lindner, 2004). Also, lifestyle magazines are one of the two main information sources for women in rural areas (Bakar, 2011) with the other being family and friends. Women's magazines continue to raise a host of crucial issues for a consideration of gender (Carter et al, 2004). Magazines aimed at women, and increasingly those for men, contain all kinds of advice on how to live, look and interact and even when we only read these items in an ironic state of mind and absorbed, it must all sink in somewhere (Gauntlett (2008).

Therefore, this study, through analysis of text from selected Malaysian lifestyle magazines published in the 21st century, aims to find out if the selected Malaysian lifestyle magazines construct gender identities that encourage stereotypes instead of gender equality.

1.1.1 Sex vs Gender

Sex of a person, Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (2006) state, is determined biologically while gender of a person is constructed socially as well as culturally (in Rahman and Jackson, 2010). Whereas gender, according to West and Zimmerman (1987), is established by means of interaction and is displayed through it, and while appearing as 'natural' it is in fact something that is created by an organised social performance. It is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalised (Butler, 2004).

West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings and they claim that gender itself is constituted through interactions. Basically, these scholars agree that sex is what you're born with while gender is contrived and is the consequence of many external influences. Carter and Steiner (2004) observe along these same lines with their statement of how gender is always socially constituted and it continues to be ruled by conventions albeit in dynamic processes and expectations that have changed over the years.

Butler (2004) believes that gender is not exactly what one 'is' nor is it what one 'has' but a tool with which the production and normalisation of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes. Butler sees gender identity as a performance that is constructed outside of one's self:

'If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical.'

On the contrary, it is a practise of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not do one's gender 'alone'. One is always 'doing' with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my own gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author, or indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author' (2004).

1.1.2 Media and Gender

Gender today, according to Butler (2004), also means gender identity and constructing gender identity is a process of fine-tuning a society's perception of what it means to be male or female, and quite a few elements play a part in this such as environment, society and media. Carter and Steiner (2004) point out how the idea of girls raised to be consumers of the future, to be domesticated, caring and objects of beauty, rather than producers is actively cultivated and promoted by newspapers and women's magazines.

The topic of gender neutrality or unordinary choices of gender identity that pervades media in recent years is discreetly side-stepped and this is evident because, according to Jackson (1996), magazines' representations of sex and sexuality continue to be 'relentlessly heterosexual' (in Farvid & Braun, 2006). This reliance on, and reiteration of, traditional notions of gender difference such as the independent man and dependent woman is prevalent throughout the magazines in various ways (Farvid & Braun, 2006).

The sexes today, states Gauntlett (2008), are generally thought to be 'equal', to the extent that the cover of *Time* magazine wonders if feminism is 'dead' in June 1998.

Equality of the sexes doesn't merely stop at male and female with comparable responsibilities but it has risen up to so many levels ranging from unordinary gender identity such as transgenderism to atypical gender roles such as stay-at-home dads that blur the lines of stereotypical gender identity constructed by the media, even further.

Fung (2002) discovers how in Hong Kong, women's identity is constructed and reinforced through magazine consumption and female readers of the so-called modern women's magazines attempt to enact a cosmopolitan identity through cultural consumption. Capitalism demands that femininity be defined and continually re-defined in ways that are financially profitable where particular definitions are tied to specific products that women are told what they need or desire through advertising (Carter & Steiner, 2004). The emergence of multiple identities for women today, according to Carter and Steiner (2004), constitutes a boon to publishers and advertisers. In the publishing industry, such as fashion magazines, editors have to please both advertisers, who represent media culture, and consumers (Crane, 1999) for revenue.

A major difference between the women's struggles in Malaysia and those of many western countries, is that the right to vote was handed to them as inscribed in the constitution when Malaysia achieved its independence from Britain in 1957 (Ariffin, 1999). Despite this given right that should have contributed to Malaysian women's confidence to elevate their status in society, Bakar (2011) observes the majority of women in Malaysia remain in low skilled and low paying jobs with few in politics, top managerial and decision-making posts, especially those living in rural areas.

1.1.3 Prevalent Stereotypes, Patriarchy and Their Sluggish Eradication

Double standards still exist where society's expectations lie and it unfortunately contributes to the ever-evolving gender construction in the global society and in particular, Malaysian society. In Malaysia, one of the key issues fought by women is reducing negative and stereotyped images of women in the media (Ariffin, 1999). Even though stereotypical female and male roles are rapidly changing around the world and along with that, modern society's perception of gender identities, the change is slow to take shape in the beginning but gaining momentum today.

It is as Obama states in his article in *Glamour* magazine, on how gender stereotypes affect all of us, regardless of our gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation (2016) and his awareness of how gender stereotypes pervade our society. 'You see the subtle and not-so-subtle social cues transmitted through culture. You feel the enormous pressure girls are under to look and behave and even think a certain way' (Obama, 2016).

Reconstruction and redefinition of identities by female readers of lifestyle magazines indicate a strong desire to change (Fung, 2002) while masculinities are configurations of practice that are constructed, unfold and change through time (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Male confusion when it comes to what masculine roles are expected of them is being made worse by portrayals of males in television commercials (Gentry & Harrison, 2010) where they are portrayed differently to what is considered as traditionally acceptable gender roles.

In Malaysia, a new form of patriarchy emerged in 1970s that not only added to the existing patriarchal system but in many ways regressed the position of Malaysian women. Malaysian multicultural society and traditional cultural values are undoubtedly male-

centric and its patriarchal system buoys prejudice against women despite their remarkable progress on many levels.

Although today is when men have a hand in raising children as much as women are breadwinners, many Malaysians still hold true to women's traditional role as mother and wife while contributing to the household financially, whereas men enjoy an inflated sense of freedom from household chores and responsibility. Unfortunately, the selected Malaysian lifestyle magazines for this study reflect this and in particular women holding true to the traditional stereotypical roles. Even though male characters in television commercials these days cook, clean and take care of children, do more domestic chores that are traditionally done by women, than chores that are traditionally assigned to men (Scharrer, Kim, Lin & Liu, 2006).

Since the construction of gender identities is the process of creating the gender differences that exist in a society, it defines male and female roles that are occurring in a society and the evolution in which they go through. For example, in Malaysia today, as in most parts of the world, it is socially acceptable for women to be in position of power at work and men having equal responsibilities in the home and child rearing. This is especially so among the generations following the baby boomers such as those born after mid 1960s such as Gen X, Y and Z. Due to the waves of feminism, these generations witness more equality between male and female in terms of earnings as well as home responsibilities than the generations before them.

With women earning higher incomes and increasingly more likely to have bigger household earning shares, they are becoming major players in the financial investment

sphere and with changes in the economic features of Malaysian household, women are expected to have bigger bargaining power and will increasingly participate actively in the household decision-making process (Yusof & Duasa, 2010).

This positive change for women is reflected in figures for Malaysian female student enrolment in university that show 69 per cent while male is at 31 per cent (Bakar, 2011). Gender may be routinely fashioned in a variety of situations that seem conventionally expressive to begin with, such as those that present ‘helpless’ women next to heavy objects or flat tires (West & Zimmerman, 1987). By the end of 1990s and toward early 2000s, there were already some significant changes where an equal number of men and women were depicted in commercials in Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia and the United States (Bresnahan, Liu & Nishida, 2001).

Despite double standards that still exist where society’s expectations lie, these changes in gender roles are significantly influencing the ever-evolving landscape of gender identity construction in Malaysian, as well as global, society.

1.1.4 Lifestyle Magazines and Text

Print media, specifically magazines, because of its ubiquity, coupled with intensity of usage and public attention (Mautner, 2008), is influential when it comes to disseminating information. Print offers advantages over other types of media and that includes convenience in terms of data collection compared to audio visual data and it is more permanent than most online material (Mautner, 2008). Also, due to a large audience, magazines shape widely shared constructions of reality (Mautner, 2008).

Lifestyle magazines or ‘general interest’ magazines are successors to style magazines that were more focused on fashion and beauty which were popular in the 1980s. Lifestyle magazines tend to be a ‘mate’ or bestfriend to their readers by offering handy hints and useful advice in the language of common sense with the irony being used as a warning against taking anything written too seriously (Stevenson, Jackson & Brooks, 2000). Hollow (2012) states along the same lines where lifestyle magazines centre on fanatical-consumption and glamourised-reproduction where they typically provide readers with guidance on what to buy, wear, eat and offer advice on relationships, work and other life-choices.

For this study, the definition of lifestyle magazine is that it is a tool that provides readers with articles on a variety of activities and products that are seen to be vital to the way readers aspire to live and identify themselves (Hollow, 2012). For instance, lifestyle magazines provide a wide range of fashion and style articles, interviews with celebrities and news on the latest gadgets as well as beauty products, tips on what to wear, do and

where to shop in everyday life. Besides that, there is a small amount on advice on home decorating, health, fitness, sex, child rearing, money management and career.

Lifestyle magazines are affordable in Malaysia, they are also conveniently available and a wide variety of them means choices to suit every demographic. More than other types of print media in Malaysia, lifestyle magazines sharply shape their articles to appeal to targeted readers of either male or female, homemakers or working professionals, and according to specific hobbies or sports such as golf, fishing, home decorating, carpentry and the like. Clear-cut segregation of genres, according to McCracken (1993), is an important initial element of the positionality a magazine offers readers and helps to shape the reading process.

Besides cultural and societal expectations, external influence such as the media assists in a big way in shaping these perceptions of gender identities and lifestyle magazines certainly play a prominent part. In magazines, women are not being sold cosmetics or clothing, they are being sold a constructed identity based upon the desires and values of an assumedly mainstream national-global audience and this constructed identity is based on an image of the perfect woman as being light-skinned, young, English-speaking, thin and heterosexual (Khattab, 2012).

Concluding from selected Malaysian lifestyle magazines' subscription data such as *Wanita*, *Nona*, *Glam Lelaki* and *Her World*, the common thread among these different groups of readers is that both men and women fall into the age group of 25 to 50. This is the age group with the biggest disposable income who are working professionals and have young families as well as having had tertiary education.

Clear-cut segregation of genres has been the style since magazines are published in Malaysia and advertising wise, this segregation of readers reaps in the most revenue for the magazine publishers. Another way of securing advertising revenue for these magazines is by marketing themselves through their covers and the cover's goal is literally to sell us the advertisements within, leading the reader to them (McCracken, 1993).

Editorials of magazines have often been accused of being advertising driven and hence hard-selling products of advertisers, influencing readers heavily in their choice making. One of two of the main sources that women in rural areas of Malaysia used when they are in need of information required in their daily lives such as on home beautification, food, hobbies and health, is the magazine while the other source being family and friends (Bakar, 2011). Most women in rural areas of Malaysia either have little or do not have access to internet as source of information therefore, physical contact with people or publications become their source of information.

Besides magazines, many behaviours associated with gender may be substantially modified by such factors as social class and status, occupation residence, education, ethnicity and social network (Nagata, 1995). Therefore, environment and media, and in particular magazines, play a significant role in influencing readers' decisions on daily lives and shaping perceptions, societal expectations as well as gender identity. There is enough evidence to prove gender identity is a construction aided by a variety of influences, namely media, and the question of do lifestyle magazines hold the power in shaping what societies, in particular Malaysian society, perceive as acceptable gender identities of today, arises.

Today, according to Alagappan and Selvaratnam (2014), magazines represent a powerful pervasive influence, they are probably one of the most powerful educational forces in society including Malaysia's. Foreign women's magazines mainly function as providers of information about fashion and beauty, and about how the characteristics of beauty are enhanced with regard to beauty and fashion products (Alagappan & Selvaratnam, 2014). Unlike earlier media portrayals, more 'girl power' messages are seen and twentieth century women are portrayed as assertive, successful in both work and relationships, heroines and people demanding and receiving their rights compared to earlier portrayals of women as housewives and mothers (ibid). This change, states Alagappan and Selvaratnam (2014), could be a result of women rejecting gender roles with their much-improved lives.

Research done on the development in Malaysian media in terms of reflecting gender equality within the past two decades, show that articles in Malaysia lifestyle magazines on the category of personal growth and development and general interest appeared sparingly (Alagappan and Selvaratnam, 2014). Furthermore, categories least featured in *The Malaysia Women's Weekly* studied by Alagappan and Selvaratnam (2014) are political and social awareness, career development as well as travel and vacation. Furthermore, what Alagappan and Selvaratnam (2014) discovered, in a decade, the most common beauty characteristics portrayed in women's magazines with foreign symbols haven't changed significantly.

Texts are commonplace, a dominant feature of today's environment and their presence is often taken for granted and treated uncritically (Burton, 2004). In the media, text is constantly produced and evolving, constantly produced and renewed, with the

intention to engage people, disperse information and produce reactions in their receivers, and they are active instead of passive in their capacity to produce meanings in the minds of their readers (ibid). Texts make up a large part of a magazine's editorial and empower readers directly as well as subliminally, thus making them a significant component of a magazine.

In Malaysia, the perception of gender roles is a delicate balancing act of marrying twenty-first century trend of modern gender identity such as non-binary gender identity and old school dogma in terms of traditional roles of women and men. The focus of this study is to discover how Malaysian lifestyle magazines *Wanita*, *Her World*, *Nona*, *Glam Lelaki*, *Men's Health* and *Maskulin* influence the construction of gender identities and gender roles in Malaysia by what they publish through content analysis and critical discourse analysis. These are six bestselling and established Malaysian lifestyle magazines targeted to readers of both men and women.

1.2 Problem Statement

This study is to gauge if Malaysian lifestyle magazines today construct stereotypical gender identities, or otherwise, and if these magazines' influence in the construction of gender identities through their text is a positive one that reflects society's slow but steady march towards equality.

This is because there are contradicting studies in terms of what magazines depict through their content. The argument seems stronger for what people read, is not what they experience in real life. In other words, magazines do not seem to reflect the reality or the advancement of society's perception of gender identity and gender roles, preferring to

portray traditional stereotypes. This has been established by numerous studies – that messages in magazines are mainly used by readers in identity development and gender socialisation process, therefore making each magazine a relevant and big influence in the everyday life of their readers. In other words, magazines shape readers' ideas of what it means to be male or female.

For example, although many Malaysian women are professionals and make up a large percentage of the country's workforce, they're still expected to make home and family their priority. Judging by the high amounts of articles devoted to fashion, glamour, beauty aids, weight reduction and cookery, stereotypes are reflected in the magazines. Mainly, the articles instruct female readers on how to attract men, to please their husbands and how to keep men interested rather than on career opportunities, health awareness, entrepreneurship and financial management. Meanwhile, male lifestyle magazines encourage masculine pursuits through articles on keeping fit, sports, outdoor adventure and grooming.

Whether these magazines truly impact the construction of gender identity of readers are still in question. A research by Sakamoto (2008) proves that it is difficult to find a relationship between the reading of fashion magazines and normative consciousness of gender roles. Its conclusion implies reading fashion magazines does not influence the traditional sex-biased roles of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers, therefore, wiping out the myth of media being a key promoter of societal traditions.

However, this conclusion is a rarity. This is because it contradicts with the evidence of the countless advice on issues such as looking good, cooking well and

parenting skills in the articles of women's magazines, with the promise of domestic and marital bliss instead of fulfilling their potential.

Contrary to the stereotypical portrayal of female in the women magazines, men's lifestyle magazines portray a number of images of the modern male identity, or at least, what are perceived as the modern traits of masculinity – grooming, fitness and health conscious. It may seem that women and men are portrayed in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender.

Based on the evidence from the lifestyle magazines and also past studies, it is evident that lifestyle magazines published in the twentieth century, and before that, do not generally portray the advancement of gender roles in societies, preferring instead, to portray traditional stereotypes as dictated by cultural and societal expectations.

The data collected from both Malaysian women and men's lifestyle magazines – as opposed to previous studies which concentrated on either men or women's magazines – for this study will show if magazines published in the twenty-first century are part of the influence in the construction of stereotypical gender identities.

1.3 Objectives

Through exploring words in articles of Malaysian lifestyle magazines, this study aims to identify if the text of the selected magazines' contribution to the construction of gender identities in Malaysia is a positive one or if it upholds stereotypes. The study's objectives are:

1. To analyse what gender identities are constructed by the text of Malaysian

lifestyle magazines.

2. To examine the gendered words used that shape gendered messages disseminated to the reader.

1.4 Research Questions

A few factors triggered this study's three research questions and the first was because Malaysia was experiencing changes in its demographics (Index Mundi, 2016) and the evolution of gender roles (Yusof et al, 2010). Next, were the results from Sakamoto's survey (2008) that showed magazines didn't influence its readers and contradicted many research efforts. The last two were Butler's (2004) statement on the unordinary gender identity and West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory on conventional gender identity construction.

The research questions are:

- RQ1: What type of gender identities do the texts of these selected Malaysian lifestyle magazines construct?
- RQ2: What kind of gendered messages are propagated to readers in the selected Malaysian lifestyle magazines?

These points narrow down the identifying of gender identities Malaysian lifestyle magazines construct and which this study intends to address and examine through content analysis.

1.5 Significance of Study

This study is part of the effort towards the substantive eradication of gender discrimination and the promotion of women in Malaysia. Its data is relevant in providing knowledge that will help understand how gender identity portrayals in stereotypical roles can impact society at large and translate into discriminatory national policies such as the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) which criminalises against married women only, women who are paid lower than their male colleagues and sexual discrimination in formulations of laws.

While past studies focussed on either the men or women's magazines, this study concentrated on both genres simultaneously. Furthermore, this study explores the text and narrative structure of the lifestyle magazines and seeks to discover the tenets that are present in both the selected men and women's lifestyle magazines.

Not only is the data from this study an update on those from previous studies on whether stereotypes are commonplace in widely read lifestyle magazines, it also proves that the current gender roles in Malaysia are further encouraged by the media apart from cultural processes and social interactions on how female and male are defined, positioned and structured. It helps raise consciousness that can dispute the existing discriminatory practices because media can be a powerful tool that can promote change.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media's undeniable influence is evident in the products we buy, trends we follow, specific gender roles we perform and what issues we consider to take seriously. Our daily lives are mainly governed by messages disseminated by the media from our political affiliations to colours we choose to wear and what we choose to buy. It is as Wood (1994) states how, woven throughout our daily lives, media insinuates its messages into our consciousness at every turn. Readers become dependent on lifestyle magazines for guidance and advice and this reinforces their belief on what's acceptable by society (Alagappan & Selvaratnam, 2014). In Malaysia, magazines play a vital socialising role through the stories featured in their content (ibid).

In this, it is easy to see just how media shapes the fundamental things in society and its mere support toward any product, person or event does leave an indelible mark on its audiences' minds. Therefore, it's vital that we understand to what degree media's influence shapes gender identity and roles in society.

Of the many opinions media shapes, in particular due to its crucial role in society, the coverage of women's issues as well as feminism is utmost and that has significantly improved as well as its representation of women (Rhode, 2003 in Wang, 1996; Wang, 1996; Gauntlett, 2002). Even though media portrays women today as assertive and successful, this is only because, Wang (1996) suspects, it is the result of women rejecting gender roles due to their improved lives. Despite these positive developments, it is puzzling to observe how women are still lagging behind the men in the media in terms of

representation, there are more men in parliament than women as well as more men holding decision-making posts than women and this is especially so in the media.

For instance, in 2010, Sendén, Sikström & Lindholm (2015) found women were significantly underrepresented in the media globally, to varying degrees and depending on region and news topic. This conclusion by Sendén et al (2015) was due to their discovery of how, in the media, the pronoun 'he' occurred nine times more often than the pronoun 'she' and 'he' also occurred in more positive contexts and with words linked to gender stereotypes.

Wood (1994) states that all forms of media communicated images of the sexes, many of which maintained unrealistic, stereotypical and limiting perceptions. The implication of this observation is serious because it suppresses the reality that is the advancement of women in society and therefore rendering women's achievements insignificant. Women, today, are still portrayed as the one administering care and nurturing while men are career driven as well as outdoorsy, or women as sex objects only to please men. Research found that in Asian countries women are more often portrayed in decorative roles in advertisements and gender stereotyping is common (Lin Zhang, Srisupandit & Cartwright, 2009; Chyong-Ling Lin, 2008 in Alagappar & Selvaratnam, 2014).

Wood (1994) describes three themes of how media represented, and still represents (Sendén et al, 2015), gender, where the first point is similar to the point made by Sendén et al (2015):

- First, women are underrepresented, which falsely implies that men are the

cultural standard and women are unimportant or invisible;

- Second, men and women are portrayed in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender, and;
- Third, depictions of relationships between men and women emphasise traditional roles and normalise violence against women.

In Malaysia, all of the above prove how gender roles are not obviously divorced from traditional stereotypes even though female employment reached 54.1 per cent in 2015 (TalentCorp Malaysia), making women a large contributor to the country's economy.

When it comes to Malaysian media, magazines are one of the popular information sources, if their readership numbers are anything to go by: women's magazine highest readership at 350,000 and men's magazine highest readership at 135,000 (refer Table 1 in Chapter 4). This is because magazines are easily accessible and relatively inexpensive.

Magazines are also ubiquitous even in rural Malaysian areas, and all these factors have allowed magazines' influence to cast a large net. Due to that, magazines can and do potentially play a big role in not only their readers' daily decisions of what to eat, wear, buy and such but also fundamentally, the construction of gender identity and gender roles in post modern times.

The significance of magazines' influence in terms of constructing gender identity can either, help eradicate patriarchy or, support its already strong presence in Malaysian society. Should patriarchy remain intact in any society, then women will forever be marginalised and their contributions insignificant, thus rendering feminism to be ineffective and its decades-long fight for equality useless.

2.1 How Media Keeps Patriarchy and Stereotypes Intact

Malaysia's patriarchal society allows male prominence in politics, in society as well as at work while women remain as primary carers and nurturers in society (Chee, 1999 in Ng, Loy, Gudmunson & Cheong, 2009). Despite feminism and its agenda of equal rights as well as raising women's status in society and workplace, stereotypes stem not only from a male-driven culture but also from women themselves.

Many women still see themselves as the one responsible for house and children and simultaneously holding onto a career (Ibrahim & Hashim, 1996) while keeping a home and men keep the status quo. This imbalance in the division of responsibilities has long been seen as the norm in many Malaysian households and is often depicted as such in the media as normal (Tan et al, 2002; Ibrahim & Hashim, 1996).

Today, Malaysian fathers still continue to have considerable financial decision-making power in households and division of labour is clear cut (Yusof and Duasa, 2010), basically, women still take care of hearth and home while men go out to hunt and gather. Stereotypes are inevitable and this factor upholds symbols such as a perfect face, dress, meal, or furniture arrangement to appear all the more relevant in the media because they urge the reader to link the fantasy to her everyday life and and is attainable by the simple gesture of purchasing the appropriate magazines (McCracken, 1993).

Furthermore, women are often objectified in the media and images of women in magazines, for instance, that emphasise physical attributes and sexuality are designed for men, embody men's expectations of women and male-female relationships (Crane, 1999). This is evident in magazines such as *FHM* that is targeted to men and more often than not

images of women in this magazine are slightly pornographic. Although *FHM* is no longer in circulation since end of 2015, magazines such as this cash in on exploiting the female form, their physical attributes and sexuality.

Yusof and Duasa (2010) notice that in Malaysia, both men and women spend less on reading materials but plenty on food, numbers show that women are bigger buyers of lifestyle magazines compared to men (Adqrte, 2015). The numbers also prove that women read more than men and therefore various print media have more influence over women as compared to men.

An increase in women employment in Malaysia means more women have larger disposable income from professional jobs that are male dominated and this influences the process of their decision-making, spending patterns and behaviour (Yusof & Duasa, 2010). This change in earned income and spending power may not mark a rise in reading habit but it does deconstruct stereotypical gender roles.

This makes media's influence on constructing their identity and gender role more vivid and vital, and its language, according to Wood (2001) negates women's experience by denying and dismissing women's importance, sometimes their existence. Language that is linked to or used to describe women has always been emotional unlike with men where language linked to them is assertive, aggressive and authoritative.

Wang's (1996) observation of how Malaysian lifestyle magazines' portrayal of femininity was defined by beauty, fashion and physical appearance and how these notions originated from the social structure and through advertisements of beauty products

enforced by editorial content such as feature articles, still happens in the twenty-first century.

This denotes the lack of evolution in magazines' content that still sells fantasy, making the fantasy attainable. Magazines urge readers to emulate what is found between the covers. It then becomes important to emulate the two-dimensional world lifestyle magazines feature, such as a perfect home, perfect style, perfect physique, perfect beauty products, and make it three-dimensional, a reality. Blinded by these factors, often stereotypical gender roles and identity are ignored, absorbed fully until they become, unquestionably, the norm.

Through these factors too, women become secondary and seen as accessories rather than key people contributing to the country's productivity and equal financial contributors to their home. Cuklanz (2016) is one of the researchers who agrees that women candidates in news coverage receive more coverage of their personal lives such as family status, personal style and taste as compared to coverage of their stances on political issues as well as their relevant experience than the male candidates.

This reference to women's domestic role and being valued more for their physical appearance, that happens even when it is not relevant, diminishes women's contributions and roles (Cuklanz, 2016).

Together, the visual images and headlines on a magazine cover offer a complex semiotic system, communicating primary and secondary meanings through language, photographs, images, colour and placement (McCracken, 1993).