Saya Happy: Re-reading the Promotion of Female Identity in Local and International Women’s Magazines - a semiotic study

Dr Umi Khattab
Public Relations Program Leader
School of Communication
Faculty of Arts & Business
University of the Sunshine Coast
ukhattab@usc.edu.au

Abstract
Purpose: This paper examines the ways in which popular women’s magazines construct the notions of female beauty and identity and the extent to which the representation reflects the ‘real’ woman in (sub) cultural locations such as Sabah, Malaysia. Given advertising’s ubiquity and omnipresence, it is of concern in the developing world that it has become a powerful social force capable of constructing consumer identities and influencing purchasing decisions on a regular basis.
Method: This study is underpinned by semiology and constructivism and deploys semiotics (de Saussure, 1983) to deconstruct signs and discover the deeper ideological function of advertising and promotion. International and local Malaysian magazine front covers and product advertisements were selected for a semiotic reading.
Findings/Results: Both international and local magazines portray women in sexualized ways and despite attempts made by locally distributed international magazines such as Cosmopolitan to localize images, models continue to represent mainstream global-national values of beauty, filling locally distributed women’s magazine pages with images of the perfect woman. Likewise, despite the desire of locally produced magazines to represent local values and ideals of beauty, mainstream global values appear to be determining factors even in family-oriented Islamic-value based magazines such as Keluarga Harmoni.
Implications: Thus in local and international magazines distributed in Malaysia the notions of beauty remain almost the same, the single difference being the promotion of local products associated with local celebrities in the former and international products associated with Western celebrities in the latter.

Keywords: Deconstruction, semiotics, constructing female identity.
Introduction

Marketers and business strategists have tended to mainly focus on the virtues of promotional culture (Wernick, 1999) and on how advertising supports the economy and enhances consumer spending and revenue (Pollay, 1986:19). While marketers and business strategists may be reluctant to criticize the effects of advertising, there is a great need to bring to public knowledge the fact that advertising does have adverse effects on certain groups of people, in particular, young women and children. Advertisers, in the main, target those who are seen to have purchasing and credit power as well as those who have the power to influence purchasing decisions. Women’s magazines are a particularly lucrative market for advertisers as, by and large, women are the primary consumers of goods and services. Women in Malaysia aged between 15-64 make up 46.4 percent of the workforce (http://www.undp.org.my/files/editor_files/files/Prodots%20with%20UNDP%20logo/Women_Participation_inLabour_Workforce.pdf). In many cases, women are the rice-bowl winners and are increasingly financially independent. They make household purchasing decisions, shop for the family and have a major influence in the domestic sphere. Studies (e.g. McCracken, 1993: 6) point out that 95 percent of space in women’s magazines is taken up by advertising. This is of grave concern because the level of media literacy among young Malaysian women may be much lower than that of their counterparts in the developed world despite high mobile (121 phones per 100 females) and Internet use (55 users per 100 females) as reflected in the 2010 UNICEF report (http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/malaysia_statistics.html).

The Malaysian school curriculum does not yet offer media and internet studies as a subject for young Malaysians and the impact of advertising on the lives of Malaysian women does not seem to be debated and rationalized widely enough in the public sphere despite the prevalence of consumer protection bodies such as the Federation of Malaysian Consumer Association (FOMCA), Consumer Association of Penang (CAP), self-regulatory agencies such as the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and codes of practice such as the Malaysian Code of Advertising Practice and the presence of women activist organisations such as Sisters in Islam (SII), and All Women’s Action Society Malaysia (AWAM). At university level, advertising is offered as a major or as a course either in the faculty of business, arts and social sciences or mass communication from a functionalist, ‘how-to-do-it’ managerial perspective with limited engagement in critical de-construction. As such, it is feared that Malaysians in general and women readers in particular may not be able to grasp the underlying (consumerist) ideology of advertising and may fail to differentiate editorial from advertising material, when in fact, the distinction between the two seems to be rapidly disappearing in an increasingly privatized and competitive media environment. For example, Melissa Milkie (2002) in her ethnographic interviews with ten editors from two prominent girls’ magazines found that editors pointed to a lack of editorial control over ‘realistic’ portrayals of girls and women, due to the direct and indirect influence of advertisers. Advertisers were said to be directly influential in promoting an unrealistic feminine ideal through the purchase of approximately half of the pages of the magazines, and therefore having an indirect influence over other pages (Milkie, 2002).

Advertising is often criticized for representing and circulating an ideal of feminine beauty that, for the average woman, is impossible to attain. Dominated by images of “perfect” bodies, the media continually present audiences with narrow, distorted representations of what it means to be female and what ‘beauty’ means. Unlike the saying that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, advertising tends to reflect a particular view of beauty as a social reality and thus contributes to creating a myth (Cronin, 2004). Thus, the constructed western ideal of feminine beauty as thin, tall, young and white seems to penetrate everyday practices and discourses (Smith, 1990), and have become key factors in defining femininity in the Asian world. Advertising reflects social and cultural values on a very selective basis, reinforcing and echoing certain mainstream values more than others (Pollay, 1986). Frith and Mueller (2003:12) contend that in Western culture the idealised view of what is feminine is ‘attractive, deferential, nonaggressive, emotional, nurturing and concerned with people and relationships’, in contrast to the view on masculine as being ‘strong, ambitious, successful, rational and emotionally controlled’. This homogenized Western and globalised ideal of beauty manifests itself in all forms of media including television, film, music, and in particular, women’s magazines. In terms of how advertising affects consumption, studies (e.g. Fiske, 1989a; 1989b) point out that young women see shopping as a form of ‘escapism’ from the boredom of domestic life. Despite online and
teleshopping, young women continue to frequent shopping malls for a range of reasons. Some authors (Fiske, 1989a; 1989b) contend that, the ability to buy creates a (false) sense of empowerment in women. It has also been suggested that women working fulltime outside the home, who are forced to surrender nurturing of infants and children to others, deal with feelings of guilt via material purchases (Fiske, 1989a; 1989b). As hyper malls spring up rapidly around Malaysia, most women, as pointed out by Fiske (1989b) seek pleasure and gratification just from peeking at the windows of shops. Of concern is rising credit card debt and shopaholic-ism among young women, that Williamson (1978) correlates to self-esteem and ‘dream-work’.

Several studies on the representations of women in international magazine advertising have been conducted in Asia and in comparative cross-cultural context such as between the United States and Asia (e.g. Frith, 1998; Frith, Ping Shaw and Hong Cheng, 2005; Hong Cheng and Frith, 2006)). In the main, however, these have looked at international women’s magazines and on Chinese/Taiwanese majority locations such as China, Taiwan and Singapore. In this research I attempt to determine what identity advertisers are seeking to construct for young women through an analysis of local and international women’s magazines circulated in a Muslim-majority and poly-ethnic sub-cultural city such as Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, located in Malaysia’s half of Borneo and reported to be the poorest state in Malaysia (Fernandez, Malaysian Mirror, 11 November 2012). I look closely at local and international women’s magazines since as argued by Naomi Wolf (1991:74) in her book Beauty Myth, magazines are ‘an invisible female authority figure to admire and obey….’ Studies point out that women’s magazines appeal to the subjectivities of women in the social realm because they help them make sense of themselves and their place in relation to the world (Weedon in Currie, 1997:455). As such women’s magazines hold cultural leadership because they represent “what it means to be a woman” (McCraken in Currie 1997:455).

Research Context and Significance

Advertising is pervasive in our lives, and has the ability to shape our beliefs and values. Studies have shown that advertising and the mass media play a role in creating and reinforcing a preoccupation among young women with physical attractiveness, particularly thinness (Downs & Harrison, 1985; Garner et al, 1980; Guillian and Barr, 1994; Moore & MacKinnon, 2001; Silverstein et al, 1986). Girls as young as seven have been described to have ‘pester power’ (McDermott et al 2006), igniting parent-child conflict and influencing parents’ purchasing decisions. In fact, Oates et al (2003) argue that marketers consider children to have spending power and can influence purchasing habits of other family members. Consequently, advertising takes up a huge amount of space in young women’s magazines. Young women who are uninformed of the sophisticated strategies deployed by the advertising and media industry to lure and ‘commodify’ audiences, may (sub) consciously fall prey to persuasive commercial images and messages. Magazines addressed to young women present value-laden messages about femininity and
consumerism with an overwhelming focus on physical appearance and self-improvement. An obsession with ever-thinner bodies, in the western world, appears to have become the predominant cultural standard for white, upper-middle class, educated females and is beginning to impact teenage, adolescent, and even pre-adolescent girls (e.g. Hesse-Biber, 1996). Repeated exposure to the “ideal” thin images in the media is said to have an impact on body image in young adult women (Utter et al. 2003:78) Research has identified that girls as young as seven tend to be dissatisfied with their body shapes, want to be thinner and fear being overweight (Champion & Funham, 1999). Correlation studies have asserted that there is a relationship between reading girl’s magazines and employing unhealthy weight-loss methods to look as thin as the models (Utter et al. 2003:78). Indeed “the cult of slenderness” has been linked with diseases such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia (Bordo, 1993). This leads young women to turn to women’s magazines for advice because of the weight-centric content they provide. In particular, these magazines overvalue being thin as being the acceptable weight and the answer to happiness (Pompper & Koenig, 2004:89). Young women hence become obsessed about their weight and unhappy with their bodies (Pompper & Koenig, 2004:89).

Freedman (1984) argues that self-doubt and inadequacy stem from comparison of self with idealized images in advertisements. As argued by social psychologist Leon Festinger (1954) in social comparison theory, consumers compare themselves to persons and lifestyles portrayed in advertisements. People look to the portrayed images and make comparisons with idealized (celebrity) images. In research on how adolescent girls negotiate meanings about becoming women, Currie (1999) found that most girls enjoyed teen magazines and compared themselves with the mediatized images, but often criticized the use of unrealistic, “too perfect” media representations of girls and women (Milkie, 2002). Further, Stice and Shaw (1994) found that exposure to ultra-thin models from advertisements and magazines produced depression, stress, guilt, shame, insecurity, and body dissatisfaction in female college students. Similarly, Posavac et al. (1998) point out that undergraduate females reported higher weight concern when exposed to media images. Although in some instances, such as Currie’s (1999) and Currie et al.’s (2009) studies, subjects may recognize that the images they are viewing are idealistic and unrealistic, the extent to which such critical assessment of media is effective, or can negate effects, is probably small. The connection between body image and media is thus an important area of study, as the effects/implications of this relationship can be serious. Indeed, ideals diffused by the media, about how a woman should look or act, are subtle yet powerful vehicles through which a woman’s ideas of self are shaped.

More specifically, this research is focused on an area of business that is wide-spread and highly profitable, and which has a powerful impact on its audiences. Women's magazines are the highest selling magazine genre, and are a multi-million dollar business. For example, Cosmopolitan, published by Hearst Corporation, has a worldwide readership of over 35 million, 64 international editions in 35 languages and distributed in over 100 countries (http://www.hearst.com/magazines/cosmopolitan.php; Blood, 2005: 64) including Malaysia. The
editions are culturally appropriated to suit female audiences in various geographical locations. In fact there are three editions of Cosmopolitan circulated in Malaysia alone, i.e. local, international and Chinese. As the magazine reaches an extensive number of women all over the world, the messages it presents about femininity and body image may have a huge influence on readers’ conceptions of self and purchasing habits.

Figure 3.
Mingguan Wanita front cover, No.1390, distributed in W. and E. Malaysia, 9-15 July 2010

Stuart Ewen (2001) suggests that modern advertising developed in the United States to influence human behaviour to meet the needs of industry by promising that consumer goods would alleviate human anxieties. To this end, he argues, advertising creates ‘fancied needs’ that is, it works to create false needs in people (Ewen, 2001; Williams, 1993). This notion of ‘fancied needs’ put forth by Ewen parallels Roland Barthes’ (1972) concept of ‘myth’. The Barthian model claims that the diverse and multifaceted qualities of reality are flattened into routine ways of thinking and talking – myth makes particular social meanings acceptable as the common-sense truth about the world. Judith Williamson (1978) and Jonathan Bignell (2002) built on Barthes’ semiotic formulation and extended the concept to detailed textual analysis of advertising. According to Williamson (1978), advertisements not only sell products, they also create structures of meaning and communicate ideologies. For example she argues that when advertisements juxtapose two signs such as Nicole Kidman and Chanel No. 5 perfume, there is often an assumption that the connection between them is natural. Similarly, advertising falsely links people’s internal feelings to an external object through what comes to be seen as a logical connection; the unattainable is associated with what can be attained - the purchased product (Williamson, 1978).

Theoretically speaking, work on women’s magazines seem to take an either overtly optimistic or exceedingly pessimistic perspective. In the 1960s’ and 1970s’, feminist sociologists drew attention to the demeaning representations of women in magazines. For example, in The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedman ascribed mythic power to women’s magazines to be able to keep ‘women within their homes, limiting them to the role of housewife’ (1974: 59). Likewise, Gaye Tuchman (1978: 18) in The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media states ‘The ideal woman, according to (women’s) magazines, is passive and dependent. Her fate and happiness rest with a man, not with participation in the labour force’. Throughout the 1980s, feminist sociologists characterized the advertisements, feature articles, and stories appearing in women’s magazines as vehicles of women’s socialization into subordinate roles. However, more recent research on women’s magazines, influenced by postmodernism and popular culture, seems to take a positive approach. For example, Janice Winships’ (1987) study of women’s magazines, explores the pleasures of these magazines for the reader, describing them as ‘mental chocolate’. Winship states, ‘Women’s magazines offer...imaginative story lines in which women achieve the successes and satisfactions everyday life cannot be depended upon to deliver’ (1987:...
For Winship, this fantastical aspect of advertising is acceptable - ‘we recognize and relish the vocabulary of dreams in which ads deal; we become involved in the fictions they create, but we know full well that those commodities will not elicit the promised fictions’ (1987, 55-56). A similar study by Ballaster et al (1991) reflects older feminist positions of concern and emphasizes the harmful quality of women’s magazines. In contrast to Winship's analogy of mental chocolate, Ballaster et al (1991: 1) state: ‘reading women’s magazines can have exactly the same effect as eating two or more bars of chocolate – the original craving was real but in the end seems to have been for the wrong thing’.

Research on women’s magazines in the domain of textual analysis, for example, by McCracken (1993: 4) suggests, magazines are ‘encoded with numerous subtexts or secondary meaning systems that frequently induce insecurities while simultaneously creating pleasure’. In contrast to McCracken, Joke Hermes, in her work Reading Women’s Magazines (1995), argues that women’s magazines, as media texts, are essentially meaningless in isolation. She states, (1995: 16) ‘although readers may recognize the codes of a given text and accord it limited associative meaning, they do not always accord it generalized significance....’ According to Hermes (1995), texts acquire meaning only in the interaction between readers and texts, and that analysis of the text on its own is never enough to reconstruct these meanings. Therefore Hermes (1995) adopted an ethnographic approach, and examined magazines through the eyes of their readers. Drawing on extensive interviews with readers, she found that interviewees often gave meaning to texts which she found to be quite independent of the text, implying that magazines were not meaningful when analysed outside the context of readers’ daily lives.

Studies carried out in the context of Malaysia have offered piecemeal, quantitative perspectives and most have investigated the portrayal of women in the news media or the representation of women in advertising (e.g. Nik Safiah Karim, 1983) concluding that representation is often stereotypical. A study on the portrayal of women on the front covers of women's magazine by Normah Mustaffa (1999) offered a quantitative comparative analysis and indicated that while modern magazines like Remaja, Jelita, Wanita, Female and Her World portrayed women in stylish, glamorous and (sensual) sensational modes, magazines that reflected Islamic and family values such as Ummi and Ibu, showcased women in soft and calm tones. Her study concludes that editorial policy impacts the way women are represented in front covers. While her study provided useful comparative findings, it did not involve interviews with magazine editors or with readers and offered more of a superficial content analysis confined to front covers per se.
Method and Sampling

This study undertook a semiotic textual analysis of magazine front covers and product advertisements from sampled women’s magazines targeted at young women and circulated in a small urban location-Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. This is an urban area in East Malaysia where, unlike the kampongs, living is largely based on consumption and shopping among a population in transition between tradition and modernity and where the role of advertising is seen to be ubiquitous and pervasive as people gain greater access to national and international media and develop consumerist attitudes (Totu, 2010). A non-random sample of three locally published international and three local women’s magazines widely circulated and targeted at different age groups (e.g. 20-29 and 29-39) and ethnic groups (e.g. Malay and Chinese) were selected for analysis. Local and international magazine front covers and two product advertisements, each one from local and international magazines were purposively selected for in-depth reading and analysis carried out in June-July 2010 during my research leave in Sabah.

Semiotic textual analysis (De Saussure 1983; Williamson, 1978) was deployed in carrying out a critical reading of product images in selected Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) and English language women’s magazines such as the local editions of Cosmopolitan, Women’s Weekly and Harper’s Bazaar and local magazines such as Rapi, Mingguan Wanita and Keluarga Harmoni. Generally, semiotic analysis does not require a large random sample. It is an in-depth critical examination of purposively selected text deployed to deconstruct the meaning of signs, symbols and images. It is a particularly appropriate tool for the analysis of advertising, as it can be used to critique texts which offer particular mythic meanings, by looking for the cultural and social patterns that underlie language and images (Barthes, 1972). Semiotics is claimed by most semioticians, to be the most useful technique for critically deconstructing both the surface and the deeper social and cultural meaning of advertisements. Contemporary advertisements are rooted in cultural significance, and many do not directly ask their audience to buy products, instead aiming to engage the audience by triggering emotional responses such as humour, shock and (sexual) desire. Such advertisements encourage the audience to participate by decoding the linguistic and visual signs, and to consume their mythic meanings, therefore participating in the structures of the meaning that the advertisement uses. The semiotic approach thus can be used as a tool for deconstructing the signs and discovering the deeper ideological function of the advertisement. Umberto Eco (1979: 6) jokingly suggested that semiotics is a discipline ‘for studying everything which can be used in order to lie’. Indeed, the value of semiotic analysis is most pronounced in today’s highly mediated, postmodern environment, where we are pervaded by a plethora of lies, deception and manufactured realities.
De-coding Process

Semiotics was used to examine selected, overt, print promotional images in three steps. First, signs and their denotative features were identified, to discover the surface meaning of the image. Research has revealed that most magazine readers spend about 3.2 seconds on advertisements (Frith, 1998: 5). Thus this surface meaning consists of the overall impression a reader gets when quickly skimming over an advertisement. Next, I identified connotations and associations in each selected product, and attempted to determine the advertiser’s intended meaning. This sales message is what cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1973) describes as the ‘preferred’ meaning - a dominant or hegemonic reading of the text. Rather than simply identifying the message which directly relates to the product, I attempted to demonstrate how advertisers associate signs with lifestyles and aspirations. This is important, because as Danesi (2002: 84) suggests, advertising today often ‘stresses not the product, but the benefits that may be expected to ensue from its purchase’. Finally, I discuss the ideological meaning and cultural values embedded in the advertisement. This final stage of semiotic analysis should expose the social myths each advertisement draws on. As Frith notes in Undressing the Ad (1998), this deconstruction of advertisements aims to expose the social and political power structures in society that combine to produce the text.

Following analysis of the advertisements, taking particular note of how female beauty is constructed in a range of women’s magazines for over 18 year olds, data were drawn together to consider differences between English and Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) women’s magazines. Subsequently, overarching ideologies perpetuated by the advertisements in all the magazines were determined.

Figure 6.
Keluarga Harmoni front cover No. 138, distributed in W. and E. Malaysia, 1-15 July 2010

Findings: Promoting ‘I’ and ‘Wish’

First a look at the front covers that remain instrumental to the promotion of women’s magazines. The sampled local women’s magazines such as Mingguan Wanita (Figure 3), Rapi (Figure 2), and Keluarga Harmoni (Figure 6) including local editions of Cosmopolitan (Figure 4), Harper’s Bazaar (Figure 5) and Women’s Weekly (Figure 1) reveal images of light-skinned flawless, tall and glamorous women all of whom are celebrities. Almost every inside of the front cover including the back cover and its inside are filled with advertisements depicting glossy products for (cosmetic) repair of the hair, face, breast and body and for enhancement of sex appeal. Normah Mustaffa (1999) argues that young women are being represented as sex symbols in women’s magazines in Malaysia and sexualized on a daily basis in advertisements.
Generally dedicated to the promotion of a narrow ideal of feminine beauty as thin and white, magazine pages seem to be dominated by tall, slender celebrity models. Rapi (Figure 2) which is targeted at young 20-29 year old Malay-Muslim female audience depicts Malaysian celebrity Julia Ziegler. Keluarga Harmoni (Figure 6), a magazine promoting family and Islamic values and targeted at 20-35 year old Malay-Muslim professionals and housewives showcases Malaysian celebrity Anne Ngasri, with two children and pregnant with the third, symbolising the perfect mother, wife and ideal Muslim woman. This depiction in the 21st century resonates with Betty Friedman’s (1974) argument of how women’s magazines are able to keep ‘women within their homes, limiting them to the role of housewife’ and Gaye Tuchman’s (1978) reference to the passive and dependent women idealized in women’s magazines. Mingguan Wanita (Figure 3) is one of the most popular locally published weekly women’s magazines in Malaysia, read largely by Malay-Muslim women across the age of 20-39. It portrays Malaysian model Shaliza Mohammed better known as Shelly. Each of these local Bahasa Malaysia magazines represents a local Malay artist relevant to the age group, language and ethnicity of the readers. In like vein the local edition of Harper’s Bazaar (Figure 5), targeted at young 30-39 year old urban, English-educated, Chinese audiences, depicts in bold and provocative ways, Carmen Soo, a Malaysian Chinese soap opera star, the Malaysian edition of Women’s Weekly (Figure 1) targeted at 30-39 year olds, portrays Angelina Jolie while the localized bilingual version of Cosmopolitan (Figure 4), a popular magazine read by 20-35 year olds, showcases Eva Longoria, appealing to urban, young, mostly English-speaking women readers.

All the magazines analysed in this study appear to be targeted at a Malay female audience with the exception of Harper’s Bazaar. The front covers of all the magazines sampled seem to give much emphasis to the faces, arms, shoulders and hands of the celebrities and these are depicted in seductive ways. Even in the case of Keluarga Harmoni (Figure 6), where Anne is fully covered from head to toe, her bare hands and fingers seem just as intriguing as the models with fully exposed hands and shoulders. All the models smile directly at the spectator making it seem that the smile is only for the viewer/reader inviting her to exchange places with the model from being ‘spectator’ to the ‘spectacle’ seeming to imply that a woman’s wish is to become the model in the front cover as the model signifies the ideal beauty a woman should possess (Mayne, 2000). The front covers of all the six magazines, local and locally published international, take on the same theme and attempt to appeal to readers through the portrayal of perfect images. Using the identity of a perfect woman, advertisers and publishers attempt to manipulate the assumed desire of many female consumers to identify with this ideal notion of perfection, even though the physical traits embodied by the perfect women are unattainable for most - especially those without entire teams of makeup artist, fashion designers and air-brush experts at their disposal. The social role and position of the models (upper middle-class, young heterosexual, mother, wife, light-skinned, Chinese, Malay) does not present an accurate portrayal of the changing Malaysian women in Sabah who span over 33 different ethnic and linguistic groups, trapped between rural and city lifestyles as the state of Sabah modernizes under the dictates of a federal Malaysian government leadership.

Moving on from the promotion of women’s magazines through the depiction of celebrities and artists on their front covers, I deconstruct the images of “normal” or “real” women (see Figure 7) who are usually restricted to make-over features, which illustrates how a product can supposedly remedy acne, dark and pigmented faces and flawed, overweight bodies, therefore reinforcing the stereotypical beauty ideal. In local women’s magazines such as Rapi (Figure 2), Mingguan Wanita (figure 3), and Keluarga Harmoni (Figure 6), traditional and alternative products are often showcased for face and body perfection with images depicting (flawed) before, and (perfected) after effects. Many of these advertised products make seductive promises of glamorous body images and improved love lives. In the ‘before and after’ images in Figure 7, we see the faces of two women before and after drinking Softea (a locally produced fibre diet drink). The identities of both women are blanketed which questions the credibility of the visual testimonials. The product promises to change the complexion of a woman into a flawless one and claims to contain Emas Mutiara (Golden pearl). Here the lustrous, shine, softness and richness of golden pearl jewel are associated with flawless skin and slim bodies. In the cultural context of Malaysia and in particular Sabah, famous for its salt water and deep sea pearls, the possession of gold and pearls is a representation of wealth and class. Mingguan Wanita caters to the 35-50 year old career oriented Malaysian Malay women most of whom adorn...
themselves with carats of gold jewels as a reflection of social class, wealth and professional status. Most locally produced alternative products like Softea take a holistic approach promoting facial, body and health remedies - a bundled effect. Softea, is being represented as a herbal drink that can have mythic power on the overall appearance of a woman.

In contrast to the before and after narrative, is the image of a perfectly flawless woman in figure 8. Figure 8 is extracted from the culturally appropriated edition of the international Cosmopolitan. The tag line ‘Saya happy…..’ is a combination of two words taken from English and Malay languages, ‘Saya’ meaning ‘I’ and in the context of the sentence meaning ‘I am happy’. While this reflects the way Malaysians in general tend to speak often mixing local words with English it also represents urban and modern lifestyle in Malaysia where the use of English reflects higher educational achievement, urban living, sophistication and status. Nevertheless, the noun ‘Saya’ or ‘I’ is rarely used in the sub-cultural location of Sabah where people, educated or otherwise, often refer to themselves as ‘kita’ or ‘we’ in everyday conversations. In other words, Sabahans’ everyday talk is a reflection of humble inclusiveness without the self-focused, egotistical ‘I’ or ‘Saya’. Hence a more culturally appropriate tagline for a specialized local Sabahan audience should read; ‘Kita Happy’ meaning ‘We are happy’ where kita’ or ‘We’ speaks of the individual in the context of her relationship to the community and where her happiness is the community’s. The combination of English and Malay words reflects Cosmopolitan’s hybrid cultural approach in promoting its brand across cultures. However, culture continues to be time, space and territory specific and seems to have little or no national or global characteristics despite state nationalism and media globalization.

Notwithstanding this, the power of media such as women’s magazines to impact and change locally specific values is apparent in the seductive ways of representing women in promotional discourses and texts. Further, Western notions of beauty in particular ‘whiteness’ appears to fill the pages of locally distributed women’s magazines. The focus on whiteness is clear as we see a pan-Asian dark-haired, light skinned, mixed Caucasian-Asian looking young woman who says “Saya Happy…” using the cosmetic product ‘Clinnelle’ that has made her skin shine and look young in just four weeks. She says “Clinelle membuatkan kulit saya tetap berseri dan kelihatan muda dalam masa 4 minggu sahaja”. Clearly, Cosmopolitan’s Malaysian edition appears to hybridise not only the representation of female models but also text through the bilingual mix of international and national languages, attempting to make the magazine relevant to an urbanizing and ‘Westernising’ young female audience. The advertisement, nevertheless, as discussed earlier, fell short of identifying local, culture-specific elements, assuming the
relevance of one set of national linguistic and cultural values for a diverse female audience in one developing nation that has many different communities sharing many different borders. On the other hand, this hybridised set of western/global-national values being perpetuated by Cosmopolitan has the potential to create fantasies and dreams in the minds of young Sabahans to be as light-skinned and as national and western as reflected in the words ‘Saya Happy’.

Figure 8.
Cosmopolitan, Malaysia July 2010. pp. 17

Discussion

As argued by social constructivists, advertisers draw on signs and their associated meaning in order to construct a pre-determined identity that is deemed suitable for the target audience and the product being sold to them. 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. This constructed identity is based on an image of the perfect woman as being light-skinned, young, English-speaking, thin and heterosexual. Advertisements depict women in this way even though most of their audiences will not fit the required description in the hope that their female audience will transfer their desire to purchase the products advertised by perfect women. The identity of perfect women manipulates young women into purchasing the advertised products, holding them captive under the “hypnotic spell” (Klein 2000:302) of idealized and desirable perfection. It is apparent from the findings and analysis that advertisements in women’s magazines still carry implicit messages suggesting to young women that their sexuality is dependent on their body image and the best way of asserting their sexuality is to possess a fair complexion and a thin body. If women believe these magazines to be the truth as studies have indicated it to be (Wolf, 1991:70), they will buy into the implicit message in the advertisements that this is the kind of beauty that men admire and are attracted to and begin to believe that they have to look like the model in the advertisement as well.

While the more mature and educated women in the developed world may have the ability to discern the material provided to them in magazines critically, this may not be so in the developing world. Further, adolescent girls anywhere in the world, go through a period of self-discovery and may be more vulnerable to being influenced by the images in these magazines (Crane in Massoni 2004:50) and may tend to believe that the ideal way to attain beauty is to be as thin, as light skinned and as English-speaking as the models in the magazine pages. As a result of these mediated images, young women may continue to place more emphasis on striving to achieve an ideal body because of dissatisfaction with their own bodies (Pompper & Koenig,
which can possibly lead to damaging consequences on their health through both eating and psychological disorders. Generally female beauty is being represented as a universal ‘truth’ and there appears little or no difference in the way local and international models are used in local and international magazines to promote the globalized ideals of beauty.

Acknowledgement: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Asian Media and Information Centre (AMIC) conference in Hyderabad India, July 2011.

References


