

## The Representation of Women in Online Advertisements: Challenging or Perpetuating Gender Stereotypes?

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### Abstract

Nowadays almost everyone uses the Internet to search for various types of information. As a result, various websites offering a multitude of services and products are found online. Numerous websites are found to provide information online because all types of information can easily be found online. This paper is a study on online advertisements in Malaysia and the way gender is represented. This study has found that there is stereotypical representation of women as being less successful, subservient and in other less flattering terms. It is recommended that women be portrayed in a positive light and should be acknowledged for their respective contribution to the community. This in turn, will create a favorable impression of women and earn the respect of the community which will tear down the traditional misconception about the role of women in the society. This study is important in highlighting the differences of gender representation found in advertisements and the effects on the perception of the readers. Violence and discrimination against women can also be prevented with the presence of gender equality in advertising. Moreover, a positive, equal, and respectful relationship can be fostered while stereotyped representation of gender roles can be prevented.

**Keywords:** Online, Gender, Representation, Advertisements, Stereotype, Recognition, Respect

### Introduction

According to Robinson (2006) the Internet has been the medium for information dissemination at the press of a keyboard as it is considered convenient and hassle-free. The public could be easily persuaded through persuasive language, and this is why modern

websites carefully design their websites to play their role convincingly to attract the targeted audience. However, some information is pure conjecture while some are based on facts. Persuasive, derogatory, patriotic, and inspiring are some adjectives to describe the language used in advertisements. According to Lazaroui (2011), some of the images used by these websites are thought-provoking, provocative, and at times awe-inspiring. Beers (2006) claims that information found online easily seeps into the minds of the society and can evoke many types of emotions because the public are most easily influenced by the right words and images portrayed (Viberg, 2008). Despite the rising popularity of online newspapers, limited research exists in examining the discourse on these websites.

Specific attitudes, entities, individuals, ideals, and institutions albeit in their textual (i.e., written) or visual form (i.e., images) are represented by the language used. Clearly, language is a powerful tool and is perpetually and purposefully at work. How language is conveyed to the masses and portrayed, and by whom is dependent upon representation. A certain message is still conveyed although nothing is uttered.

Based on the principles of critical discourse analysis this contrastive study strives to investigate the representation or more specifically the ways language (image and text) is used in online bank advertisements in Malaysia. This study also aims to determine the similarities or dissimilarities in the language used in bank websites and to also identify the way gender and race are represented in these websites. A total of 22 online advertisements will be evaluated. The analysis involves the main page or homepage of the respective websites of various companies.

### **Background to Research**

It takes between \$50,000 and \$1 million per year for website maintenance while website design costs around \$100,000 and to \$2 million to create (Schenider & Bruton, 2004). This is mainly because the design and maintenance of websites normally involves complex and advanced technology.

Discourse is defined as the product of the interplay of language in visual or textual representations (Fairclough, 2001). Representations are also known as the words, ideas, images, elements, events, meanings, objects, and symbols that contribute to discourse. Moreover, Gee (2005) also said that by combining representations that are fluid, situated in context, and under constant revision discourse models are formed. It is an undeniable fact that any type of communication revolves around the use of language. Wetherell (2001) claims that the fundamental role that language plays is in representing ideas, images, elements and so forth. Representation involves the way individuals use language. According to Gee (2005) there are two fundamental ways language is used to represent. First and foremost, to support the performance of social activities and identities. Besides that, to support human affiliation with cultures, social groups, and institutions. Language is mainly shaped by several contexts such as cultural, economic, historical, political, and social as the nature of language is subject to social behaviors and conditions. Kress (1989) asserts that language is socially constructed as the construction of meaning is never neutral and it is defined relative to the individual's social and cultural experiences and subject to relations of power.

### **Problem Statement**

Various gadgets such as mobile phones, laptops, tablets, I-pads and so forth make newspaper advertisements easily accessible to the masses. The increased sales of these

gadgets are a testament to this fact. The quickest-expanding smartphone market in the world at present include China, the United States and India (Malay Mail Online, 7<sup>th</sup> Sept 2014).

Conventional mediums such as newspapers, television, radio, magazines, and others are no longer reliable or considered convenient ways to obtain information and knowledge. The hectic lifestyle and societal pressures to keep updated of developments influences many people to turn to the Internet. For the past 10 to 20 years ago, the function of websites has replaced the traditional medium. For the modern society, conventional media is considered rather slow in disseminating information as compared to the Internet. Online portals use language to persuade their online readers with their own perspectives and judgments on numerous issues though limited research exists examining the type of language used on institutional websites.

### **Research Objective**

1. To identify the way gender is represented in online advertisements in Malaysia.
2. To identify the differences in the way gender is represented in online advertisements in Malaysia.

### **Research Question**

1. How is gender represented in online advertisements in Malaysia?
2. What are the differences in which gender is represented in online advertisements in Malaysia?

### **Significance of Research**

The differences of gender representation found in advertisements and the effects on the perception of the readers are highlighted in this study. The presence of gender equality in advertising can help prevent the occurrence of violence and discrimination against women in the future. In addition, stereotyped representation of gender roles can be further prevented besides promoting a positive, equal, and respectful relationship between the opposite genders. This study aims to investigate how gender is represented in online advertisements. Undoubtedly, information is disseminated at lightning speed with the help of the Internet. More than 1.2 billion Internet users were recorded in 2007 (Daekyung & Johnson, 2009). Moreover, there was a 250 per cent increase in Internet users from around the globe since the year 2000. China, the United States and Japan were considered the top 3 Internet users in the world in 2009 (CIA, n.d). Since the Internet is more important than traditional mass media, it clearly has a huge influence on almost everyone in the tech-savvy world we live in today. According to Daekyung & Johnson (2009) the World Internet Project claims that information that is obtained through the Internet is credible and accurate by the global online users.

It is not wise if businesses keep on neglecting this rising segment of purchasing power and underestimate the impact of degrading and sidelining women in their advertisements. In today's world, women make up most of the workforce as compared to the past. The Department of Statistics states that presently women represent approximately 7 million of the available human resource and have better purchasing power than in the past. This is mainly due to more opportunities in education, exposure, an open-minded mindset, more employment opportunities, and other factors. Women have made countless contributions to the society not only as traditional homemakers, but also in the field of politics, science,

technology, finance, arts, education, military, and other important fields. As a result, women are more financially independent and have access to many opportunities than ever before. They can also gain financial advice and relevant information. However, women are still not being given the acknowledgement they truly deserve even in the present day due to the glass ceiling, traditional mindset, and stereotypical notions. This is evident particularly in the media today. As a result, women are trapped in the roles given by the media.

At present, since information is literally at the tap of a keyboard websites are popular among the modern community. Thus, it is imperative that a study on the representation of gender in online advertisements be conducted as online commercials shown repetitively will have adverse effects in the long run as it shapes the mindset of the community at large on what is considered appropriate behavior and the roles to be played by women in the society.

### **Literature Review**

The language used can be misused or abused but it can also be used for the greater good to convey information to the public. Thus, it is imperative to discover how language is used in online advertisements as online users are often being exposed to them online. People use language to generate meaning of the world (McKenzie, n.d). Different representations that will be created are based on the functions of an event. Representation or the language used refers to discourse which has been defined by the Oxford dictionary to be written or spoken communication. According to Day (2001) meaning is determined through the context in which the discourse is found. Gee (2005) stated that discourse in a certain context normally involves a cacophony of ideas, images, and objects.

Although the spoken or written word make up a language, images are also powerful and are an important part of a language (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). According to Kress (2000) images are regularly used to convey numerous actions, ideas, emotions, information, expressions, events, regulations, rules, and symbols. In addition, Fairclough (2001) asserts that images serve a better function to relay what words fail to convey under certain circumstances. Moreover, Hall (1997) also states that a wide range of meanings is conveyed using images. Furthermore, Hodge and Kress (1988) also mentioned that images and text are similar as the interpretation of meaning is dependent on social conditions or context in which they are used. Images are often used in media to convey a certain meaning as visual representation is deemed to leave a deep impression on the audience. Images are easier to understand as it only takes a moment to look at an image as opposed to reading a particular text which is more time consuming. Advertisements have long made full use of the images of women and the issue of race to depict a certain message.

Previous studies relating to the representation of women in advertisements have shown a negative depiction particularly a stereotypical portrayal of women as homemaker and trophy girlfriend or wife (Plakoyiannaki et.al., 2008). Furthermore, another study by Wolin & Korgaonkar (2003) has shown that throughout the years that not much has changed and that women, despite the success women have achieved, are still depicted as mere decoration, and do not reflect a positive or confident image to the public. In addition, in another research by Matthes, Prieler & Adam (2016) it is shown that men are portrayed as having the upper hand and given a stronger as well as powerful image in most advertisements used through the years. These results have been further substantiated by another study by Akestam et.al. (2021) that men were seen to be the dominant gender who are often in control, strong, and more powerful than women. All these studies have proven that despite the success in the

numerous fields such as business, academic, sciences, arts and so forth, women have still not been given the recognition or acknowledgement that they rightfully deserve as can be seen from the advertisements shown in these studies.

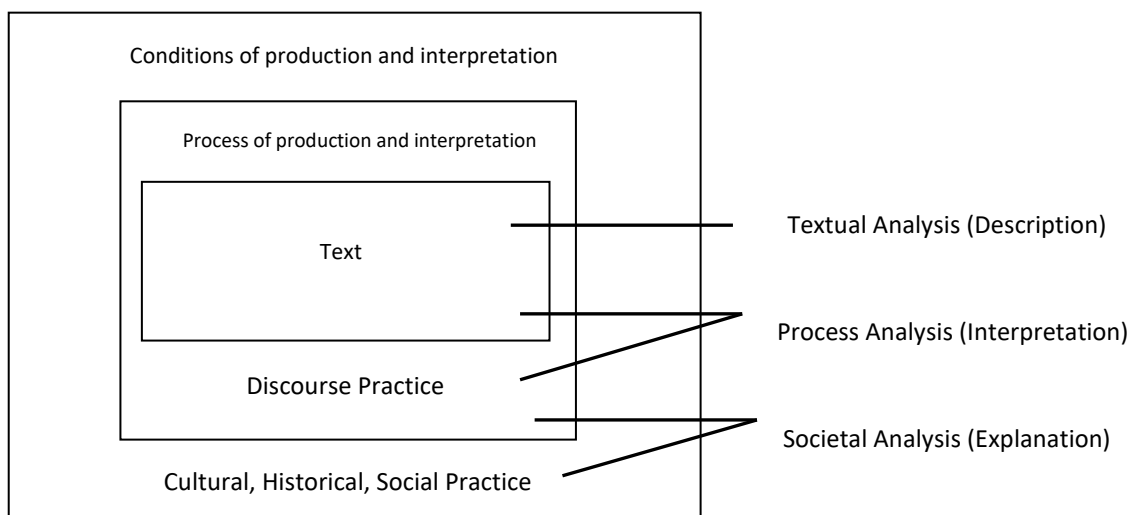
Women have always been depicted as subservient, passive, easily manipulated and less intelligent while men are often portrayed as strong, wise, dominant, and more powerful than the fairer sex. Furthermore, according to Tiongson (1999) the Asian media also depict women as weaker, easily manipulated, nurturing, selfless and other degrading characteristics. This is even though the world is more technological advance but unfortunately, stereotypical depiction of women is less than flattering due to traditional and narrow-minded mindsets. It is perplexing that stereotypes remain the same today as they did many years ago. However, Femiano and Nickerson (2000) stated that the public and media production personnel have grown accustomed to these stereotype portrayals as they are easier to create based on narrow and incorrect assumptions of people and what they represent. Media stereotypes are harmful as they influence the thinking and behavior of the masses because images shown on a consistent basis will eventually influence and mould the thinking of the society as to what is considered as acceptable behavior and norms. Unfortunately, the media still represents women in a negative light and does not acknowledge the countless contributions of women to the society.

Discourse analysis is a research method to analyze language: verbal or written language (which include images, symbols, documents, face-to-face talk, non-verbal interaction) within a particular social context. Fairclough (2001) states that discourse analysis is related to the study of a language within a particular context using a set of theories and methods, but the rest is from the link below. According to Harris (1952) discourse analysis is a method on the study of connected speech or writing. Brown & Yule (1983); Cook (1989) state that discourse can simply be seen as language in use. The set of norms, preferences and expectations which relate language to context is what is defined by 'language in use'. The focus of discourse analysis is not merely limited to the analysis of the formal properties of language as it also takes into consideration what language is used for in contexts such as social and cultural contexts. Moreover, Cook (1989) states that discourse analysis is the search for what gives discourse coherence. Cook elaborates that discourse does not necessarily have to be correct in terms of grammar or conformity of grammar rules but it must be coherent or possess coherence which is understood by the receivers of the discourse. In a nutshell, in the study of discourse analysis the language communicates something to the receivers in a coherent manner.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is also an application of discourse analysis and does not limit its analysis to specific structures of text or talk. Intertextuality (the shaping of text's meaning is shaped by another text), interdiscursivity (borrowing of features of discourses or genres in text or talk), and socio-historical context of formation and interpretations of texts/discourses are issues dealt with in CDA (Bhatia,2010).

To examine the language and images on online advertisements this study utilizes the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The purpose of this study is to examine the number of characteristics which represent the role of men and women in online advertisements newspapers. Theoretically, CDA provides the means to analyze language and images to raise awareness about issues of importance, such as the portrayal of women in online advertisements.

Methodologically, the approach related to CDA has three dimensions of analysis as depicted in Figure 1 that Fairclough (2001) developed. Firstly, descriptive analysis involves the description of textual, visual elements and their properties. Secondly, interpretive analysis involves an examination of the contents of language and its functional parts to understand and interpret the relationship between the role of language and the greater social structures it reflects and supports. The third dimension, societal analysis emphasizes the interpretations and explanation of the data related to the larger cultural, historical, and social discourses.



**Figure 1: Fairclough's Dimensions of Discourse and Discourse Analysis**

Source: Janks, H. (2005). Language and the design of texts. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 4(3), 97-110.

### Methodology

According to Flick (2009) a purposeful sampling technique is a technique whereby a sample is purposefully chosen to enable the researcher to focus in more detail on a certain issue, subject, or phenomenon. This sampling technique will be used to help narrow down the number of online advertisements which will be analyzed. Furthermore Gee (2005) claims that this sampling technique is most suitable in the research of online material which includes online advertisements. The focus of this study will be a corpus of online advertisements namely advertisements related to sports attire, banks, vehicles, cellular phones, and mobile networks. These categories were chosen on the basis that they are generally associated with men and not women. Other categories such as clothes, footwear, food, and beverages were not considered because they mainly use women in their advertisements.

A paper-and-pencil analysis of the printed online advertisements aggregated electronically is conducted (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). To maintain textual and visual representations of online advertisements, they are saved in HTML (hypertext markup language) and in the form of screen captures. This will enable a recursive analysis to be conducted several times to closely preserve the dynamic and static contents and interconnectivity of the original, "online" advertisement by creating an "offline" copy of an advertisement (Bergman & Meier, 2004). Then, the nature of the content based on the rubrics

previously mentioned when faced with interactive content is documented (Bergman & Meier, 2004).

According to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) past studies utilizing CDA involves an examination of textual and visual artifacts which show that the analysis and description of written text often occurred simultaneously with the examination of visual texts (e.g., images, graphics, and multimedia). According to Fairclough (2001), the interpretation and conclusions drawn are based on a combination of language and images based on the process and societal levels of Fairclough's theoretical framework.

### Research Findings

This study found that online advertisements related to sports attire, banks, vehicles, cellular phones, and mobile networks have portrayed men and women rather differently.

#### Sports attire advertisements



Figure 1(a)



Figure 1(b)

In Figure 1 (a) and (b), the Nike advertisements showed that women are powerful and are able to do things that men can do such as being involved in sports and entering Olympics. The women are seen to be very capable, not helpless, or weak, strong physically and mentally too as they must overcome social barriers which are traditional. The advertisement show that women have to be mentally strong to overcome traditional mindsets and train themselves to always improve and become strong both physically and mentally.



Figure 1 (c)



Figure 1 (d)

In the Adidas advertisements as shown in Figure 1 (c) and (d), male athletes were seen in action playing sports. This gives a powerful portrayal of men as being competitive, confident, and strong.



Figure 1 (e)

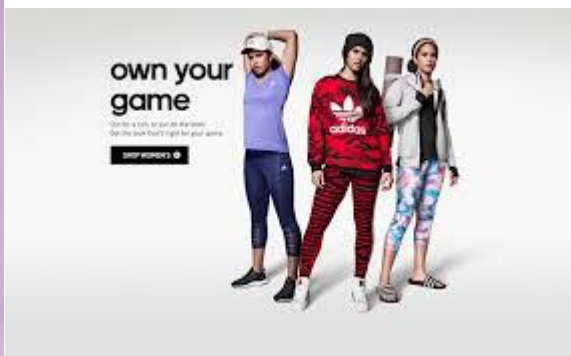


Figure 1 (f)

However, in the Adidas advertisements as shown in Figure 1 (e) and (f), young women were shown where a few were scantily clad and just showed off the sports attire by Adidas. These young women were not shown to be doing anything sports related. They are simply modelling the sports attire.



Figure 1 (g)

In addition, as shown in Figure 1 (g) two well-known celebrities, namely Rita Ora and Maya Jama are shown modelling Adidas sports attire. These women are simply modelling the clothes and do not symbolize or represent power or strength whereas in the advertisements where men were portrayed, the men showed great prowess in sports.



Figure 2 (a)



Figure 2 (b)



*Car Advertisements*

Tom Hiddleston, a famous actor, was the model in the Jaguar advertisement as shown in Figure 2 (a) and he showed how the car was equipped with many sophisticated and hi-tech features. Only a man was used to highlight the car’s special features because the audience does not associate a powerful, sleek, and modern car with women. In Figure 2 (b), 3 men were shown and in one part of the advertisement, a helicopter is seen hovering near the sleek Jaguar. This gives the impression of power and strength.



Figure 2 (c)



Figure 2 (d)

In the Mercedes advertisements above as shown in both Figure 2 (c) and (d), two men were seen near the cars. These luxurious cars are owned by men as they were considered wealthy and powerful individuals. This luxury car brand uses men to symbolize wealth and power.



Figure 2 (e)



Figure 2 (f)

However, in the Mercedes advertisements above as shown in Figure 2 (e) and (f), scantily clad women were seen standing near the car. In the latter advertisement, 3 women were seen assembling a car in a factory, but they were not decently attired whereas the man standing there was decently attired. This is an obvious sexualized portrayal of women and obviously degrading to women.



Introducing hassle-free Bulk Account Opening. Saves time and enhances productivity.

Designed to provide convenience when opening your staff salary account.



Figure 3 (a)

Here are 3 simple steps to open a salary account for them:

**Step1**



Key in your employee's details in template provided for payroll

Figure 3 (b)

**Bank Advertisements**

Meanwhile in the Bank Islam advertisement as shown in Figure 3(a) shows a solitary figure of a young man standing which appears to give an air of resoluteness and wisdom. Moreover, when a man is being used in this type of advertisement, it portrays men as individuals with the potential to become leaders whereas the advertisement could have used a woman instead. Furthermore, in the above image the man gives the impression that a man has the capability of achieving success at a young age. However, at the other end of the spectrum in the RHB advertisement as depicted in Figure 3 (b) the portrayal of an older and apparently less attractive female is shown in the advertisement. Moreover, this is the only advertisement found which had shown a female boss. However, the woman in this advertisement was

instead shown to be an older individual, plain looking, casually dressed in no makeup, unkempt appearance and merely wearing a cardigan which does not radiate success. Obviously, the woman in this advertisement is the direct opposite of the man in the previous advertisement. The image being represented by both genders are polar opposites. This advertisement gives the idea that women are only capable of running a small business at an older age. In addition, this advertisement also conveyed the message that women can only achieve a minimal amount of success and that this type of women is usually negligent about their physical appearance hence the drab image in this advertisement.

#### *Cellular Phones Advertisements*



Figure 4 ( a )

In the above advertisement as shown in Figure 4 ( a ), a drab looking woman is shown to be incapable of holding a mobile phone properly. In this advertisement, she fumbles around with her handphone and almost drops it. The rather stereotypical portrayal of a dumb blonde who is careless with her belongings. It is not a flattering portrayal of a woman in the modern world.



Figure 4 ( b )

BTS is one of the most famous bands from Korea and is shown in this advertisement. They look strong, powerful and in control as opposed to the woman seen fumbling with her mobile phone in the previous advertisement by Apple in Figure 4 ( a ). The dark background lends an air of sleek sophistication which is in direct contrast to the previous advertisement whereby the background was a plain setting of a street.

Mobile Network Advertisements



Figure 5 (a)



Figure 5 (b)

In the advertisements above, young women were shown to be having fun and in the latter advertisement, a flamboyant looking young woman is seen fixated on her mobile phone. This is not a serious or professional depiction of women in this modern era.



Figure 5 (c)

In the above advertisement as shown in Figure 5 (c), a young woman is seen as the owner of a coffee shop. Apparently, the coffee shop is not a large-scale business enterprise, and this gives the impression that women are only capable of operating a small-scale business. Apparently, women are not considered credible enough to be portrayed as being business owners of a huge business enterprise. Thus, this puts women in a negative light which clearly undermines the role that women play in the modern world at present.



Figure 5 (d)



Figure 5 (e)

In the above advertisements as shown in Figure 5 (d), the men were seen standing confidently while in Figure 5 (e) Usain Bolt, an Olympic gold medalist is portrayed as the fastest man in the world and this is compared to the speed of the Celcom Internet coverage. Again, a man is shown in the advertisement to reflect the image of speed, strength, and power.

### Conclusion

This study found that online advertisements related to sports attire, banks, vehicles, cellular phones, and mobile networks have portrayed men and women rather differently. In most of these sports attire as well as bank advertisements, the men are portrayed as being more successful, young of age, yet they are already successful, independent, knowledgeable. However, the women are depicted as successful only when they are older, and if they are young women they are portrayed as frivolous individuals who only want to look pretty, go shopping and have fun. Hence the many credit card ads targeting women as their potential customers by offering attractive credit card packages with various benefits. Moreover, in the advertisements related to vehicles men are depicted as strong, dominant, powerful, in control, manly and independent. The vehicles shown alongside the men were luxurious and sophisticated vehicles. Even the context of the advertisements where men were shown alongside these vehicles were often associated with business and success. The vehicles were at times shown in an outdoor setting and driven by men to shown that the men can manage such a powerful vehicle even in challenging situations such as bad weather and terrible road conditions. Unfortunately, women are depicted as the partner of the powerful men, the women are portrayed as trophy spouses or girlfriends. If women were shown in the ads, the cars advertised were compact cars and of lesser value. The context is also different as the cars shown alongside women were shown in a more casual setting like going shopping or holiday with friends. In advertisements on cellular phones and mobile networks, men are portrayed as savvy users of technology, powerful and intelligent while women are unfortunately depicted as having less knowledgeable in matters related to technology and are apparently less tech savvy. In advertisements on electronic devices, men are shown alongside more expensive and sophisticated electronic devices. On the other hand, women are shown alongside the lesser expensive and less sophisticated devices. The women are often shown as ignorant or less tech-savvy in terms of using the electronic devices while men were shown to be fully in control and intelligent with regards to all things electronic or technologically advance.

As a conclusion, this study has found that there is stereotypical representation of women as being less successful, subservient, weak, and low in social status. It is highly recommended that women be portrayed more positively and acknowledged for their immense contribution to the surrounding community. Thus, this will create a favorable impression of women which will tear down the traditional perception about the status and role of women in the society.

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