THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MALAYSIAN MAGAZINE: A CASE STUDY ON CLEO

Erlinda Mikal

Bachelor of Education with Honours (Teaching of English as a Second Language) 2008
THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MALAYSIAN MAGAZINE:
A CASE STUDY ON CLEO

ERLINDA MIKAL

This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
Bachelor of Education with Honours
(Teaching English as Second Language)

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK
2008
The project entitled ‘The Portrayal of Women in Malaysian Magazine: A Case Study on CLEO’ was prepared by Erlinda Mikal and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Education with Honours (Teaching English as Second Language).

Received for examination by:

(Yvonne Michelle Campbell)

Date: 23/5/08

Grade
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my special gratitude to my Lord and saviour, Jesus Christ, for His endless blessings in completing this final year project. Millions of thanks to Mdm. Yvonne for patiently guiding and supporting me throughout the completion of this project and also thanks to all the other supervisees who are tremendously helpful. I would like to thank those wonderful friends who helped me collecting the magazines for this project (Thresa, Oliver and Sing Yea). My deepest gratitude goes to my beloved parents who are always there supporting me. Then, I would also like to say thank you to all the UCF members, and all my special friends for their prayers, supports and love. Finally, special thanks also to Dean who has never failed to care, support and encourage me throughout the completion of this project.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstrak</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview                              | 1    |
1.1 Background of Study                          | 1    |
1.2 Statement of Problem                         | 3    |
1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study            | 3    |
1.4 Significance of the Study                   | 4    |
1.5 Operational Definition of Terms             | 5    |
1.6 Chapter Review                               | 6    |

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Chapter Overview                              | 8    |
2.1 Previous Studies on Portrayal of Women       | 8    |
2.2 Effects of Stereotypical Portrayal of Women  | 10   |
2.3 Language and Sexism                          | 13   |
2.3.1 Language and Gender                        | 14   |
2.3.2 Sexist Language and Sexist Discourse      | 15   |
2.3.3 Language and Feminism                      | 15   |
2.4 Summary                                      | 16   |
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.0 Chapter Overview 18
3.1 Research Design 18
3.2 Texts Selected for Analysis 20
3.3 Instruments for Data Collection 21
3.4 Data Collection Procedure 21
3.5 Data Analysis 22
3.6 Limitations of the Study 23
3.7 Chapter Review 23

CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.0 Chapter Overview 25
4.1 Terms used to Describe Women 25
   4.1.1 Title 25
   4.1.2 Noun/Noun Phrase 29
4.1.3 Verb/Verb Phrase 35
   4.1.4 Adjectives 37
4.2 The Existence of Sexist Discourse 40
4.3 Discussion 42
4.4 Summary 43

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY

5.0 Chapter Overview 45
5.1 Summary 45
5.2 Implications of the Findings 49
5.3 Recommendations for Future Research  50
5.4 Conclusion  50

Reference List  53
Appendices  56
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1
Theoretical Framework

Figure 3.2 (a)
Audited Circulation Trends – English Language Magazines

Figure 3.2 (b)
Audited Circulation Trends – Women’s Fashion and Beauty
ABSTRACT

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MALAYSIAN MEDIA

ERLINDA MIKAL

This study aims to identify the portrayal of women in Malaysian media (Cleo Magazines 2006) which is grounded on feminism. The objectives of this study are to find terms (noun/noun phrase, verb/verb phrase and adjectives) used to describe women and to evaluate the existence of sexist discourse in the language used based on the feminist theory. It is a case study using discourse analysis at the word and phrase level, particularly based on systemic functional grammar. The findings showed that the terms used to describe women in the magazine were either neutral or non-neutral (sexist) terms. It also showed that sexist discourse especially exclusive terms for female existed in the language used in the magazines.
ABSTRAK

PENGGAMBARAN WANITA DALAM MEDIA MALAYSIA

ERLINDA MIKAL

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti penggambaran wanita dalam media massa Malaysia (Majalah Cleo 2006) yang didasarkan atas feminisme. Objektif-objektif kajian adalah untuk mengetahui kata dan frasa (kata nama, kata kerja dan kata sifat) yang digunakan untuk menggambarkan wanita dan menilai kewujudan penggunaan bahasa seksis berdasarkan teori feminis. Kajian ini adalah kajian kes yang menggunakan analisis wacana di peringkat perkataan dan pernyataan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan kata dan frasa yang digunakan untuk menggambarkan wanita adalah neutral dan tidak neutral (seksis). Selain itu, hasil kajian juga menunjukkan kewujudan wacana seksis terutamanya wacana yang eksklusif untuk wanita dalam penggunaan bahasa dalam majalah tersebut.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview

This chapter describes the background of the research problem. It also explains on the aims and objectives of the study, significance of the study, operational definition of terms and the scope of the study.

1.1 Background of the study

The relationship between media and gender is so crucial that it is widely discussed and researched. Media and communication are the central elements in modern life, while, gender and sexuality are how people think about their identities (Gauntlett, 2002). According to Gauntlett (2002) media portrays and contains so many images of men and women alike that it is impossible it has not impact on human’s own sense of identity. In the modern societies, people typically consume many hours in front of television, looking at magazines, books or go to movies, etc. It seems obvious and inevitable, then, that we will be affected by these experiences (Gauntlett, 2002). Gauntlett (2002) also stated that this is mainly because the media shows us situations and relationships from other people’s points of view. It is also because of the external fascination of drama that we can see ‘how the world works’ in
lives other than our own. Therefore, it could affect our own way of conducting ourselves, and our expectations of other people's behaviour. For example, in women and men magazines, they contain all kinds of advices on how to live, look and interact. Even if we only "read these items in ironic state of mind, it must all sink in somewhere" (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 2). Based on previous studies on media and gender, women have been portrayed stereotypically throughout the media such as television or magazines. The images and messages conveyed were bias and degrading the value of women worldwide which can affect on women's behaviours and others' perceptions towards women.

In the media, language plays a very crucial role in conveying message to readers as a medium to deliver the authors' beliefs and opinions. Authors' knowledge, beliefs, opinions and motivations about an issue will be reflected through their choice of words which will be read by the readers in which may affect the readers' knowledge, beliefs, opinions and motivation. Language is a powerful tool which is "perceived as the medium through which the self is formed and which shapes the way that we think about the world" (Mills, 1995, p. 14). Cameron (1992) also stated that language is a "weapon" used by the powerful to oppress and silence their subordinates; nor is this belief unjustified.

However, language has done injustice towards women where there is an imbalance of words for both genders. This scenario can cause stereotyping which may degrade gender value. In a male-dominated culture, the language is expected to be controlled by men, whereas females are forced to develop their own language, meanings and translations. Additionally, Benedict (1992) had stated that there are more words for men than for women. Besides that, there are "more words available to insult women than men, especially in sexual terms, and that words for women's bodies are more taboo than those for men" (Cameron, 1992, p. 107). She also added that there are "insult-words for women who have too much sex (slag) and women who have too little (pricktease); women can be tasty and at the same time cunts. The
same behaviours engaged in by men are described admiringly (a male ‘slag’ is a stud)” (Cameron, 1992, p. 108).

Realizing the importance and the problems of language in portraying women in the media, this study focuses on the language used to portray women in Malaysian media, particularly, magazines. Besides that, the study serves the purpose to add in the database of language and media research since there are limited number of studies done on language and media especially on women’s portrayals.

1.2 Statement of the problem

According to Cameron (1992), sexist discourse refers to ideas and practices that treat either sex ‘unfairly’ or even just differently which applied to both men and women. Gunther (1985) stated that sexist discourse is about the socialisation of the natural category of sex as gender. That socialisation has massively far-reaching effects on all of social life; on families and family structures; on work and lack of work; on leisure; on how men and women are to see themselves and their possibilities of action; on larger scale, political structures. In short, there are few areas of social and cultural life which are not affected by the prescriptions of sexist discourse.

Therefore, prior to the influence of sexist discourse in women’s daily life, this study serves to analyse on the language used in best seller women’s magazines, Cleo using discourse analysis. Even though the research does not study on the effects on the use of sexist discourse, the results of the study may show how or how not sexist discourse is used.

1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study focuses on the language used in a Malaysian women magazine which is Cleo for the year 2006. Therefore, the objectives of this study are;
a) to look at the terms used to describe women in the magazines such as noun/noun phrase, verb/verb phrase and adjectives,

b) and to evaluate the existence of sexist discourse in the magazine.

1.4 Significance of the study

Studies on portrayal of women in the media are mostly based on content and semiotic analyses. However, “feminist critics tend to focus on content analysis alone, and this is perhaps one of their greatest shortcomings, since their claims are often based on untenable theoretical positions” (Mills, 1995, p. 14). She also added that the critic using content analysis has to assume a single meaning for the text in which it is possible to claim whatever interpretation they like for a text with “no agreed criteria for assessing how one reading might be better than another” (Mills, 1995, p. 14).

However, this study is done using discourse analysis which is based on the feminist theory to further support the findings and discussions on the existence of sexist discourse. Discourse analysis is concerned with the context accompanying the texts and not merely analyzing words in isolation which are relevant for this study. Besides that, there are a limited number of studies which concentrating on how the language used portrays women in the media. Therefore, this study will add to the research database on language and media especially on portrayal of women.

Besides that, sexist discourse is an on-going debate among the linguists claiming that women are being degraded in terms of language. Gender-biased language has forced the feminists to rise up and voice up the imbalance of words used for both men and women. Fewer words to describe women indicate an understatement towards women in which may degrade the value of a woman. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the extent to which the text is ruled by sexist discourse through this study.
Lastly, the result of this study will be useful for future media activists who wish to avoid gender-bias language towards women. Therefore, in the future, media activists will be more cautious and critical in using language to portray not only women, but also men alike.

1.5 Operational definitions of terms
1.5.1 Portrayal of women

According to Kee (2005), consistently throughout Asia, women have been portrayed in the media as victims, subservient, nurturing, sacrificing and objectified sexualized beings. Women have been inaccurately represented in the media and also neglected especially in their contributions towards the socio-political and economic development of society.

In media, language, one of the many important mediums, is used to convey messages about women. Language has shaped the way readers portray women in the media, positively or negatively. For example, the term 'slut' is used to describe a woman who has multiple sex partners but there is no specific term for a man who has multiple sex partners. There are other words that portray women through language such as nouns, adjectives and verbs that indicate the values of women in media.

1.5.2 Sexist Discourse

According to Cameron (1992), sexism is often used to refer to ideas and practices that treat either sex 'unfairly', or even just differently. Sexism occurs in many areas such as social treatments and language. Sexism in language or sexist discourse, particularly, "might not mean only expressions that exclude, insult or trivialise women, but also do the same thing to men" (Cameron, 1992, p. 99). However, according to Cameron (1992), sexism in language is one manifestation of the system (sexism), and it works to the disadvantage of women, not men.
Therefore, in this study the focus will be on analyzing the language used to portray women and to evaluate the existence of sexist discourse based on the feminist theory. The researcher focuses on the neutral terms to describe women and then on "expressions that exclude, insult or trivialise women" to evaluate the existence of sexist discourse (Cameron, 1992, p. 99).

1.6 Scope of the study

For the purpose of this study, featured articles on the cover are chosen for analysis while omitting quizzes and interviews. Featured articles on the cover indicate that these articles are assumed to attract female readers. Year 2006 is chosen as it is the latest year of the magazine publication which closely portrays the women of this era.

Besides that, the study only analyses the language used and none is done on the images accompanying the articles. The analysis is also excluding interviews and quizzes. The study is only on the word and phrase levels which are noun/noun phrase, verb/verb phrase and adjectives to describe women.

However, in this study, readers' opinions and the effects of the portrayals on readers are not analyzed.

1.7 Chapter Review

This chapter has described and explained on the background of this study in which a number of researches had been done on this study on different area or aspect. It also has explained on the statement problem on issues of how women have been portrayed wrongly through media. Therefore, significantly, this study is to further investigate the portrayal of women in Malaysian setting that is Malaysian women's magazines (Cleo 2006). Then, the operational terms that have been explained and
defined are portrayal of women, feminist theory and sexist discourse. Last but not least, this chapter has also included the scope of the study.

In the following chapter, the literature reviews which are the most relevant to this study are presented.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Overview

This chapter provides the reviews of previous studies on portrayals of women in the media. It also touches on the effects of wrong portrayal of women. Then, it moves on to the explanation of language and sexism and language and gender.

2.1 Previous Studies on Portrayals of Women in the Media

Most of the studies done previously on portrayal of women in the media are content analysis. For example, the studies done by Peirce (1990) and Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman (1997) - as an extension of the content analysis conducted by Peirce (1990).

In a study done by Peirce (1990), a research was conducted on women’s magazine fiction on roles, attributes, and occupations of main characters using content analysis. All large-circulation (more than one million) national women's magazines that published fiction during the 1990s and with similar audiences were chosen for analysis. The findings showed that changes have taken place in women's magazine fiction. The characters are not necessarily the stereotypically attractive and
middle-class but married women in the 26-35 age groups who live with one to two children in a house in the city that Bailey and Loughlin are found. Three in which of the theme is romance, while others are marital problems or contentment in relationship but as the years go by the theme has changed to family happiness. Few of the characters were anything but white Americans. Besides that, the characters are dependent with stereotypical female jobs.

The second study was done by Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman (1997) as an extension of the content analysis conducted by Peirce (1990). The study explored the content of Seventeen magazines in the years 1945, 1955, 1965, 1975, 1985, and 1995 to determine if the articles that are presented have changed in response to the feminist movement from the 1940s to present day. Feminist writers have suggested that the strongest waves of feminism occurred in the 1940s and 1970s, and in the 1990s. Results indicate that there is a relationship between the content of Seventeen magazines, in terms of traditional vs. feminist messages, and the women's movement (Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1997). The present study also found a higher percentage of feminist messages in the content of 1945 and 1995 issues of Seventeen. Although there has been an increase in feminist content of Seventeen magazine in the study, the changes are minor and still do not reflect the roles of teenage girls. When analyzing the content of Seventeen magazines, one may wonder what are the concerns and interests of a modern teenage girl. However, the content of this publication does not seem to reflect the aspirations and levels of achievement in which young women are capable. Even in the 1990s, this publication, still does not address most of the intellectual issues concerning young women. Despite the active women's movement, a wide gap still exists between what is and what should be (Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1997)

Additionally, Luther (n.d.), an associate professor, conducted a study on how women are portrayed in the media, and noticed that women tend to be more sexualized. For example, in Seventeen Magazine, the most common messages sent to girls were the ones about appearance and attracting the opposite sex. Based on this
study, it implies that girls are more interested about their appearance and how to attract their male counterparts.

Then, according to Hinders (2007) a study was conducted in 1998 to examine the themes of sexual behaviour in teenage girl magazines. The study conducted a textual analysis of a variety of magazines, including YM, Teen and Seventeen. The study found that these magazines encouraged readers to present themselves as sexually desirable, develop the skills of sexual therapy to enhance men’s sexual pleasure and performance, an become communication teachers to help men become better relational partners (Hinders, 2007). Nevertheless, the findings also showed that the themes are balanced with a mixture of diverse themes.

Media Awareness Network (n.d.) noted that sports commentators (97% of whom are men) use different language when they talk about female athletes. Where men are described as “big”, “strong”, “brilliant”, “gutsy” and “aggressive”, women are often referred to as “weary”, “fatigued”, “frustrated”, “panicked”, “vulnerable” and “choking”. Besides that, commentators are also twice as likely to call men by their last names only and three times as likely to call women by their first names only. Media Awareness Network (n.d) argues that this indicates that female athletes take the role of children, while male athletes are seen as adult.

Based on the studies above, all results show that there is an existence of sexism in the media in which can cause problems in gender issues. All the studies above were done in the Western which indicates that there is still lack of researches done on Malaysian media especially on portrayal of women.

2.2 Effects of Stereotypical Portrayal of Women

The way in which women is represented in news media send important message to the viewing, listening and reading publics about women’s place, women’s roles and women’s lives. According to Blazevic (2007), the media portrayal of women has
a certain influence on young girls. For example, in the Seventeen Magazine, young girls may place more importance in their appearance and getting the right guy, instead of trying to develop and improve themselves. Besides that, the pressure of looking good can lead to some dangerous behaviour for a certain age. Surveys have shown that girls at age of 8 or 9 are already concerned about their bodies, their looks and fashion (Blazevic, 2007). Therefore, TV shows, advertisements, music videos and magazines carry a responsibility towards their audience since they are the ones who can be influenced easier than the others. This is mainly because their personalities, however developed, are still not strong enough to resist certain pressures (Blazevic, 2007). Blazevic (2007) also noted that Feminist scholars and eating disorder theorists have long claimed how the media is creating pressure on females to pursue ideal body and to reach their (media's) standards of beauty. Magazines have been criticized to be advocates and promoters of the desirability of an unrealistic and dangerously thin ideal.

For the purpose of this study, the words and phrases used in the magazines are analysed. This is mainly because the crucial relationship between language and identity which later have an impact on women readers. According to Cameron (1998), there are various labels we apply to ourselves and each other and the subject of labelling is clearly of some importance. Cameron (1998) also added that language is a powerful device for labelling and categorizing. The importance of language and identity is further elaborated by Mills (1995) in which the theory of linguistic determinism is put forward. The theory of linguistic determinism suggests that differences in the structures of language actually determine the different views societies have of the world. Furthermore, it is suggested that the language of a culture shapes the way its speakers see the world.
It is possible to analyse this argument as consisting of two stages. The first stage—that people name the world differently, emphasizing different aspects, depending on what is most relevant to their way of life—is not too problematic. We assume that a language responds to the needs of a community, and the fact that some languages have a great number of ready-made ways of describing certain phenomena, and others do not, is seen to reflect what those cultures find relevant and important to their way of life (Mills, 1995).

Mills (1995) stated that linguistic determinism argues 'that language produces our perception of the world'. According to this second stage of the argument, our thought-systems are influenced by the language formed by our community and that 'reality' is constrained by the linguistic forms available to us as members of that community. In fact, the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group (Mills, 1995). In other words, there is no two languages are ever entirely similar as it represents the social reality. According to Mills (1995), there are 3 main effects of sexist language use. Firstly, it may alienate female interlocutors and cause them to feel that they are not being addressed. Secondly, it may be one of the factors which may cause women to view themselves in a negative or stereotyped way. It may thus have an effect in the expectations of women and men have of what women can do. Then, it may confuse listeners (or readers), both male and female (for example, as to whether a true generic noun or pronoun is being used or a gender-specific one)

Language is indeed a powerful device that can cause stereotypical portrayals of women in the media in which affected women readers. In media, language is used to construct norm which constrains and confined women to what the society of that language is expected of women. Even though this study does not analyse on the
effects of stereotyped portrayals, this study can be the landmark of many researches to come on the effects.

2.3 Language and sexism

The most controversial issue in language and gender is sexism. Therefore, in this study discourse analysis is used to study the terms used to portray women and to evaluate the existence of sexist discourse in the magazines. According to Renner (2005), sexism is a system of beliefs and practices that affirm the dominance of men over women. Renner (2005) also added that sexism pervades social relations and institutions, affecting everything from people's domestic arrangement to their career choices.

Adding to that, according to Wilks (2002), in Latin language, there is a rather peculiar grammatical rule which states that if a single man is in crowd of women, the speaker must address the crowd in the masculine plural form, not masculine which indicates the patriarchal society the Latin speakers live in. Unlike English, the word "guy" or "guys" is commonly used to indicate any variety of a group from all male to all female. Hence, it is not a rule to use masculine plural words when addressing a mixed crowd; it is simply the vernacular (Wilks, 2002). In addition, there is apparent use of gender biased vocabulary in the English language concerning cuss words in which the majority involve women in some insulting pattern. The cuss words are such as "mother fucker", "bitch", "son of a bitch", "bastard" and "whore". Wilks (2002) suggested that the use of these words probably relate to the prohibition put on woman's sexual enjoyment during most of American and English history.

According to Renner (2005), many feminists have claimed that the use of generic masculine terms is more than just a symbolic declaration of women's lesser status. Some would argue that the use of the English generic masculine is more damaging to women's interests; that it impedes communication and encourages discrimination.
According to Mills (1995), the argument about how language influences our perception of the world is important to feminists for a number of reasons. There have been many critical feminist surveys of English lexis (Nilsen et al. 1977; Schultx 1990; J. Mills 1989), which have argued that sexism is inherent in many of the labels which English speakers use. Other feminists have written about lexical gaps in the language – women’s experiences which they find hard to talk about, because English provides them with no readily available term (Spender 1980). It is frequently argued that these usages, and others detailed below, reveal how sexist our society is. Feminists taking this position argue that language reforms are in essence pointless, because as long as society is sexist, sexist meanings will reappear, and to change language forms is to deal with the symptoms, not the cause.

2.3.1 Language and Gender

The relationship between language and gender is very crucial that it has been widely discussed and studied world wide. According to Renner (2005), gender is a salient distinction in English; its importance is underlined in ways that men and women are described and portrayed so differently. For example, men and women in English-speaking culture are given different personal names, have distinct address forms, are denoted by gender-marked pronouns, differing adjectives can be used to describe their attributes and so forth (Renner, 2005). Therefore, these linguistic conventions encourage English speakers to pay attention to gender whether or not it is relevant. This implies that the language used to describe a gender is not only based on how the writers value their subjects but also the restrictions of the language itself which leads to stereotypical portrayal of gender.

An article by The Empire State College, State University of New York, stated that in English language, gender exclusive language discriminates on the basis of gender. It consists of words or phrases that focus on one gender unnecessarily,