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In Pursuit of Mr. Right: Constructed Masculinities in Malay Teen Magazine

Sharifah Fazliyaton Shaik Ismail^{a*}

^aUniversiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the representation of masculinities in the print media, notably Malay teenage magazine in Malaysia. Through an analysis of a regular column of twelve sequential issues of a bi-monthly magazine, *Remaja*, this paper examines how masculinities are constructed in this magazine. The analysis revealed that the magazine reinforces hegemonic masculine ideals, in particular, through romantic heterosexual relationships. The male's voice is dominant in shaping the behaviours of the females while the females are found to be overtly active in ensuring the progression of the romantic relationship.

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1. Introduction

Scholars agree that the media plays an important role in adolescents' sexual socialization (Evans, Rutberg, Sather & Turner; 1991; Firminger, 2006). Stories that are infused in the media "provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture" (Kellner, 1995). One of the most popular media that is perceived as having a potential influence on young women and men through its arrays of feature articles, advice columns, regular columns and advertisements is teen

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +604 928 5532
E-mail address: sfsi@uum.edu.my

magazines. Studies in the west has established that teen magazines are read by almost six out of every ten teenagers and this makes teen magazines one of the most popular media consumed by teenagers these days (Nielsen Report, 2009; Roberts & Foehr, 2004). In their study, Garner, Sterk and Adams (1998) observe that teenage magazines are “one of the most accessible, inexpensive, and readily available media for information about sexuality. Magazines allow for private, repeated readings. They are easily purchased in stores, are free in libraries, and . . . can give more explicit kinds of information to readers.” Teenage girls, in particular, rely on the magazine’s content as a guide that governs their behaviors, attitudes, values and perceptions of themselves and others (Finders, 1995; Strasbuger, 1995). The appeal of teen magazines lies in the fact that as the sources of information, these magazines address pertinent issues, such as sexual issues in depth and more directly (Carpenter, 1998; Garner, Sterk and Adams, 1998; Ward, 2003).

Teenage magazines are considered crucial during the teens’ identity and relationship development period (Firminger, 1997). The magazines’ content are thought to be more attractive than the readers’ personal experiences and knowledge (Currie, 1999). One of the themes that dominate teenage magazines, apart from the importance of physical appearance, is the heterosexual romantic relationships that become the focal point in the lives of the young males and females (McRobbie, 1982; Evans, et al., 1991; Pierce, 1993; Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998; Currie, 2001). One of the constant messages that is often conveyed to young women in teenage magazines with regard to these heterosexual romantic relationships is that the guys will and should dominate the relationships (Carpenter, 1998; Durham, 1998; Garner, Sterk, and Adams, 1998). The guys in teenage girls’ magazines are often depicted as “the providers of potential love, romance, and excitement and as highly sexual, attracted to the superficial, and emotionally inexpressive” (Firminger, 2006). One striking notion that is often perpetuated in teen magazines is that “the road to happiness is attracting males for successful heterosexual life by way of physical beautification” (Evans, et al., 1991, Signorelli, 1997; Carpenter, 1998; Currie, 1999).

1.1. Constructs of masculinity and teenage magazines

When Western societies experienced a cultural shift that is from a production based culture to a consumption culture social institutions and cultural practices also underwent a major transformation (Fraser, 1989). One of the areas that is greatly affected by this shift is gender socialization, namely gender identity and gender roles. Women’s roles in society are noticeably affected in this shift and numerous studies, in particular, feminist studies have dealt with the changes affecting the traditional roles of women. The impact of social structural change on men, however, has not much been documented (Alexander, 2003). Men and masculinity began to be scrutinized during the 1990s, with western scholars depicting masculinity as physically and mentally strong, invulnerable, objective and unemotional. Brannon’s (1976) seminal work, for instance, identified four themes of hegemonic masculine gender role: No Sissy Stuff, the Big Wheel, the Sturdy Oak, and Give ‘Em Hell! Brandon’s No Sissy Stuff indicates that “a ‘real man’ must never, never resemble women, or display strongly stereotyped feminine characteristics” (Brannon, 1976). Real men have deep voice, abhor use of make-ups, and disregard fashion and cleanliness. They often present themselves as invincible, and inexpressive toward other men. They also ignore traditional female related tasks and interest, including care for children and literature. Big Wheel men are those who strive for fame, status, success and emphasize on acquisition of wealth. The Study Oak reflects manliness, independence and self-confidence. The Give ‘Em Hell men are aggressive and known to use violence to obtain sexual favours from women. Other versions of gender ideals and dominant male gender forms began to emerge after Brannon’s work (Connell, 1995; Doyle, 1994; Gerzon, 1992; Kimmel, 2001) and masculine ideals are found to change not only over time but also during the course of a man’s life (Alexander, 2013). The masculine ideals are institutionalized in social structures such as the school, family, peers and media, where young boys are socialized to become the ideal men. Connell (2002, p. 29) brings forth the idea of hegemonic masculinity which he defines as “configuration of practice within gender relations, a structure that includes large-scale institutions and economic relations as well as face-to-face relationships and sexuality. Masculinity is institutionalized in this structure, as well as being an aspect of individual character and personality.” He asserts that despite the multiple nature of masculinities, there is one that is more dominant or socially acceptable way of being a man. Hegemonic masculinity is dominant and impacts not only the relationship between men and women, but also on the relationship between men. Images of masculinities are profound in the media, notable teenage magazines (see Duffy and Gotcher, 1996; Consalvo, 2003). In Garner, Sterk and Adams

study (1998), they found that “In teen magazines guys were set up as ideal poster boys meant to be treated by young women as icons—someone to placate, adore, and manipulate. This ideal, two-dimensional male was presented as the type of “guy” who could fulfill the “girl’s” dream, standing in for all men for young women trying to understand and know men’s wishes, needs and behaviours.”

Despite the emphasis on the males that girls gravitate to, not much has been done to scrutinize the representations of males in these magazines, in particular in the nonwestern cultures. How are males depicted in teenage magazines, in particular in romantic relationships? Specifically, how do the Malay teenage magazines portray masculinities? Are the boys in the Malay magazines ascribed hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2002) similar to those in the western magazines? Connell’s (2002) hegemonic masculinities, this paper seeks to explore the representations of males in in the Malaysian media in order to establish how males are depicted in the teen focused magazines. Most of the work that looked at gender at play in teenage magazines are almost exclusively within a western cultural context. Much remains unknown with regards to the representation of masculinities in Malaysian teenage magazines, notably, the Malay magazines. Such research is crucial as it can be considered as an “essential antidote to naïve universalism” (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990). In addition, research in representation of young males is important because such research “may show gender as a process being worked out—rehearsed, refined, and modified” (Consalvo, 2003).

2. Method and data

In order to find out how males fare in the Malay teenage magazines, the researcher has examined one of the earliest and long-running teenage magazine, *Remaja* (literally means ‘teenager’) which began its inception in 1984. This magazine, published by Grup Majalah Karangraf Sdn Bhd. *Remaja*, was chosen because the magazine reports that it is the “No 1 Magazine in the Market”, presumably for teen readers, and also due to fact that the magazine, which was incepted in 1984, has a base annual circulation of approximately 63,479 copies per year (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2009). Nine sequential issues of this bi-monthly magazine; from January 2013 to June 2013, were randomly selected for analysis. However, for the purpose of examining the representation of males in romantic relationships, only one column from these issues, which looked at gender relations in depth, will be scrutinized through textual analysis. *Remaja* includes, among others, a 10-page section that focused on the males (this section called *Hero*) where opinions, points of view, boys’ culture, and interests are explored in detail. Magazines often present similar materials to its reader to ensure loyalty (Duke, 2002). Similarly, the male section of *Remaja* is found to be presented in a similar manner. Some of the regular columns covered in this section include *Grooming*, *Stail* (Style), *Info Lelaki* (Information for Men), *Produk Lelaki* (Men Products), *Hero Pilihan* (Selected Hero), *Klip Fesyen* (Fashion Clips) and *Rahsia Lelaki* (The Guy’s Secret). The column labeled as *Rahsia Lelaki* was chosen for analysis primarily because its title situates the female readership as potentially unaware or as needing guidance to know about male in general. Furthermore, the title promised a sense of mystery of the males to the female readers and as such, warrants an in-depth examination.

3. Analysis and discussion

Although the column was phrased as “The Guy’s Secret”, the analysis revealed that not all nine columns disclosed mysteries that surround the male species. Rather, five of the columns shared a similar theme of telling the girls what they should know about male and what males expect from girls, while three of the columns were marked as “girl’s insight of boys.” The length of the column analysed was a page each and all the nine columns analysed were written by the same author, M. Shahir Abdul Rahim, presumably a male writer based on his name. In some instances, the columns served as a guidance that illustrate the readers what to expect from males/females in a relationship and what the appropriate behaviors for men and women should be. The following discussion will further elaborate the portrayal of males, in particular, in the Malay teen magazine.

3.1. What do men need?

Masculinity is what a society or a culture expects of its men. This theme is prevalent in the five columns analysed. Part of this expectations, argues Abdul Rahim (1 January, 2013), includes the notion that the males have different characters that are natural as part of their masculine gender which need to be understood by the females.

Abdul Rahim in “Setiap Ragamnya Punya Makna” (Meanings Behinds His Behaviors) identified six common behaviors displayed by the males: determined, commitment phobic, anti-female, womanizer, traditional and corporate-like. Abdul Rahim advised the female readers to be wary of “determined” guys as this type of males are “iron men” (*lelaki besi*) who are self-reliant, secretive, quick-tempered and can be too committed to the demands of their jobs that their girlfriends (if they have one) would be ignored in their relationship. The author also suggested that the guys who have commitment issue are usually well-dressed or have good fashion sense and popular among girls. The readers are warned that this type of male makes empty promises and should be avoided at all costs. As for guys perceived as anti-female, the author argued that anti-female guys are usually spend thrift, dislike children and enjoy collecting collectibles. They are known to use women for their own gains. However, the author believed that an anti-female guy can be converted as a good catch if he meets the right girl who guides him to the right path. The young female readers are warned not to be involved with “womanizers” who are often smooth talkers, own luxurious cars and sport branded items. Abdul Rahim singled out the “traditional” guys as the best type of guy that a girl should consider seriously. According Abdul Rahim, traditional guys are not only smart in managing finances, they are also polite, calm and have moderate fashion sense. Traditional guys, argued the author, prioritize their family and are known for their willingness to commit. Although traditional guys are often domineering and patronizing, the female readers were advised to seek them out as they are the best potential husband for the girls. A corporate kind of guy is depicted by the author as someone who prioritizes work before other things and he prefers an independent girl who shares his workaholic nature.

The notion of unfaithful men is also framed in another column written by Abdul Rahim (1 April, 2013). In “*Punca Lelaki Curang*” (Why Men Cheat), the author suggested that men usually cheat when they are confronted with multiple choices of women, when the women (girlfriend) failed to make him happy, or when they feel as though they are being ignored by their girlfriend. Men also tend to cheat if they desire new things or when they seek revenge to get back to their girlfriend. The author suggested that good girls are also the cause of the guys’ infidelity. Good, forgiving girls who often forgive the guys will reassure the guys that the girls will overlook their cheating. Young readers were told to soothe the male ego and were given the impression that a guy strays when a girl fails to make him happy. One theme that is interesting and worth pursuing is the notion of males sulking (*merajuk*) in romantic relationships. Masculinity is often tied to the concept the guys are usually unemotional and inexpressive. But in one of the columns analysed, Abdul Rahim (1 Mei 2013) in “*7 Tanda Dia Merajuk*” (7 Signs that Your Guy is Sulking) taught the young readers to be alert when the guys are sulking. He argued that sulking is common and part of man’s nature. Males, emphasized Abdul Rahim in his writing, are driven to sulk to garner the girls’ attention. A sulking guy will brood unexpectedly and the girls are expected to persevere and ignore the embittered guy even if he hits her.

The image of violence is similarly observed by Cohn and Zeichner (2006) who note that “men are socialized to appear dominant and powerful” and “may, therefore, learn to use physical force or domineering approaches to resolve conflicts and cope with confrontational situations.” By persuading the girls (the readers) to ignore the abusive nature of the sulking males, the author has certainly endorsed abusive behavior on the part of the males. Instead of urging the girls to take positive actions by, perhaps, reporting the abuse or leaving the guy, the author continues to advise the girls to find ways to placate their sullen boyfriends. The girls were implored by the author to understand that guys often bottle up their feeling and that boys tend to keep their feelings to themselves. Abdul Rahim (1 June, 2013) in his column “*Jom Kembali Rasa Cemburu Si Dia!*” (Let’s Resurrect His Jealousy) also advocated the girls to make their boyfriends jealous in order to cement their relationships. He cheerily promoted “girl power” in this column when he asked the girls to, for instance, shop till you drop, put on make-ups, make use of handsome male friends, be active in sports and mingle around as part of the strategies to make the guys pay more attention to the females. Again, in this column, the readers are given the impression that the girls must put in more effort or in other words, to be more active in ensuring that the relationship progresses well. Females are assigned the responsibility to digest the peculiarities of men in order to be happy. Farvid and Braun (2006) concur this notion when they state “men were implicitly located as the underlying source of women’s fulfilment, security and happiness.” Females, in most magazines, were “situated as *needing* men. Men were rarely represented as ‘needing’ women in the same manner, and their presumed full autonomy and independence was something women implicitly still do not possess, nor should they desire it” (Farvid and Braun, 2006).

In his column “*Persepsiku atas Perilakumu*” (What I think of Your Behaviour), Abdul Rahim (15 February 2013) listed eight behaviors that a girl needs to have in order to catch a guy. The author cautioned the female readers that the males are not too keen on girls who whine, are uncommunicative, hostile and loves shopping. Barely dressed

girls, although are welcomed warmly in the world of men, according to Abdul Rahim, are seen as light skirts and can be labelled as sluts. On the other hand, girls who take care of their physical appearance, that is, girls who wear cosmetics are seen as desirable. Males are also revealed to prefer the company of girls who talk very fast and are involved in direct selling. Speed talking girls are deemed as friendly, happy-go-lucky and active. Girls in sales are considered attractive, according to Abdul Rahim, because this indicates that the girls are smart and courageous. These two traits are what the guys find attractive in a girl. Here again, the magazine promulgates the need for the girls to invest their emotions, that is to be communicative and not cold towards the guys, and at the same time, to put their unhappiness aside. Physical appearance is paramount to the males where female are concerned and readers were made aware on the need to beautify themselves if they were to get the right man and to maintain their relationship successfully. In general, the columns analysed perpetuate the men's voice in dictating how women ideally should behave in order to be accepted by the men.

3.2. *What do women like / dislike?*

Masculinity is what a society or a culture expects of its men. This theme is prevalent in the five columns analysed. Part of this expectations, argues Abdul Rahim Abd. Abdul Rahim (1 January, 2013), includes the notion that the males have different characters that are natural which need to be understood by the females

Although the columns analysed are about "The Guy's Secret", the author also valorized the male traits that girls desire. In "*Kriteria Lelaki Idaman Gadis*" (Criteria of Desirable Men), Abdul Rahim (15 May, 2013) emphasizes that girls yearn for males that are: good communicator, possess real man look, a bit crazy, caring, financially sound, mature, open minded and smartly dressed. The masculine ideals touted in these magazines are similar to those reflected in research on masculinities (Connell, 1995; Tragos, 2009) Guys were informed in this column that the beautiful girls prefer guys who possess rough masculinity. Skinny, neat males are perceived to be metrosexual and too feminine by the girls. Girls are said to prefer funny, caring guys who are able to make them laugh and know how to please the girls when they are stressed out. In this column, the author articulated that having money is vital in a relationship as guys with strong financial means will endear themselves to the girls who desire stability in their lives. Mature men are also deemed as desirable unlike younger males who are known for their penchant to have fun and not regard the girls' feelings seriously. The readers were told that girls prefer guys who are open-minded and are embarrassed to be in the company of quiet, traditional men. Even though this column ostensibly focused on the ideal traits that the girl's desire in men which the author probably assumed male readers will read, indirectly, the female readers who read the column will also be socialized on what to look for if they are searching for their Mr. Right.

Ironically, the list of criteria was not generated by a female author but rather it was produced by a male author, Abdul Rahim. In a similar column published on 15 April 2013, Abdul Rahim as a male author also specified eight male traits that the girls abhor. In "*8 Sifat Lelaki Dibenci Gadis*" (8 Male Traits that Girls Hate), the author documented that girls hate guys who are filthy, rude, over protective, smoke heavily, obsessed with physical appearance, have wandering eyes, greed and too controlling. The author underscored that guys need to resist from checking out the mirrors and must appear to be confident all the time. The female readers were advised to leave their boyfriends who gaze at other beautiful girls. Although, girls are depicted as disliking thin guys (in another column written by the author), girls also dislike gluttony and tend to reject guys who binge when eating. Guys were advised by the author to curb their tendency to over possess or over protect their girlfriends. The readers were told that being in a relationship does not give a guy the right to control a girl's life. The variations of masculinity found in the columns analysed reflect what Prusank (2007) summarizes as "the hegemonic male in the adolescent teen magazines can be thoughtful, considerate, concerned with relationships and freely express love and affection – but he is equally likely to be cruel and freely express anger and rage by dominating females, at times physically."

4. Concluding remarks

Teen-focused magazine is one of the cultural mechanisms that conveys gender messages to its readers. The analysis above supports that, where heterosexual romantic relationship is concerned, the females are placed with high expectations in ensuring that their heterosexual romantic relationships are successful. The magazine, *Remaja*, through its regular column reinforces hegemonic masculinity as postulated by both Brannon (1976) and Connell (2002) whereby desirable men are those who are traditional, mature, physically appealing, financially successful and

caring. Humorous males also top the list. Unlike Brannon's (1976) masculine ideals that are mostly tough, the males in the magazine are shown to possess a "soft trait" when the author depicts the males as sulking, a common trait understood by most Malay females. New and old meanings of what it means to be a man is incorporated in the Malay teenage magazine analysed. The magazine also encourages the female readers to become what the guys wanted them to be. The male readers who read the magazine will have to deal with various female expectations of a desirable man and perhaps, be socialized to meet those expectations. The female readers, on the hand, will share the beliefs that their Mr. Right should display the masculine ideals that they have encountered in their readings. Since the findings of this study is limited to only one magazine with a fairly limited number of editions, premature extrapolations from these findings are cautioned. Further studies need to be conducted to see how other Malaysian teenage magazines present masculinities and what gender roles are given to males in these magazines. Other sections of the magazines, in particular, feature articles, various regular columns and advertisement need to be examined to establish the construction of masculinity in Malay magazines and to see whether there are variations in the portrayal of men.

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