

# Exploring Women's Relationships: An analysis of Malaysian Women's Lifestyle Magazines

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## Abstract

This study presented content analysis of two women's lifestyle magazines for the period of January until June 2016. Combining media studies and relationship research, this paper examined cover pages and cover stories of two highly popular and widely circulated women's lifestyle magazines in Malaysia; *Nona* and *Wanita*. Preliminary analysis indicated women who appeared in the cover page and cover story of the two magazines were attractive, successful and that they held prominent positions within society. They included businesswomen, actresses and politicians/activists. Women's relationships, as portrayed in these magazines, comprised of children, husbands and family and this is consistent with their private roles as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters. From the analysis, women in the cover pages of these two magazines continued to be presented in traditional and patriarchal gender roles including being nurturant and submissive with an emphasis on their sexuality. This is in spite of them holding non-traditional roles as providers and representing success stories of women in public domain. The analysis provided supports that gender roles and cultural expectations continue to influence people's social experiences. In addition, these gender roles cultural expectations also shape and at the same time enhanced by the representations in the media.

Keywords: Interpersonal relationships, gender, media

## 1. Introduction

This paper focused on analysis of the cover page and cover story from two highly popular and widely circulated women's lifestyle magazines in Malaysia; *Nona* and *Wanita*. The aim of this analysis was to understand how women's relationships are presented in women's lifestyle magazines in Malaysia. This paper combined social psychological research that focuses on understanding women's interpersonal relationships and media studies that concentrate more on different types of mass media and how they exert their influence on society. We are particularly interested in understanding how certain aspects of the content in specific media (in this case, women's life style magazines) are relevant in understanding how women's relationships are viewed in society. More specifically, we explored how portrayal of women in the cover page and the cover story of these magazines represent and at the same time dictate how women should relate to people around them.

## Women's Magazines

Media does not exist in a vacuum and it is not an autonomous institution. Media operates within a social context where social forces and power relations can impinge upon the way issues and events are covered. Reality is socially constructed in a manner that things and people portrayed in the media are viewed as 'normal' and 'natural'. According to Lemish (2004), media texts are one of the prime cultural sites that enable the study of the position of

women in society. Lemish reiterated that worldwide studies on the representation of women, based on a variety of methodologies (both content analyses and semiotics) and media, suggest that the position of women is not equal to the position of men. In the media, women are mostly relegated to the private sphere, emotional and sexual worlds and presented mostly in subordination to men. This includes images portrayed in advertisement (Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009).

This framing of women according to Lemish was defined by Tuchman (1978) as ‘symbolic annihilation’ achieved through the processes of condemnation, trivialization, and the absence of women from the media. Representations in the media of people, events and relationships are about power-relations. Messages emerge from very complex systems of production. Hence, how gender is (re)produced in the media cannot be understood in isolations as it is about power-relations. An analysis of media content is very crucial due to the media’s role as a powerful source of meaning about the social world.

Women’s magazines in particular can be viewed as presenting issues related to societal perceptions and expectations of women’s culture including beauty, fashion and relationships (Ferguson, 1983). To a certain extent, women’s magazines have the potential to contribute to wider cultural process by defining the position of women in a given society at a given point in time. As such, it is important to understand how certain aspects of women’s lives, including relationships are being portrayed by these magazines.

Women’s magazines are ideologically different from men’s magazines. While men’s magazines represent only certain aspects of their lives such as business, hobby and sporting interest, women’s magazines define women.

*“Women’s magazines offer their readers particular definitions and understanding of what is it to be female” – Ballester, R et al (1991).*

Women are viewed as having the need to be told on how they should behave and women’s magazines provide the means for it. Women’s magazines often use a woman’s face to reach out to their female readers (Winship, 1987). Whilst most ordinary women find it difficult to relate to the perfect image of most cover models, they can still find commonalities among them. Winship (1987) argues that women in the cover images are defined in masculine terms. As such, this provides a common ground between them and their women readers where both groups exist in men’s world.

Siddiqui (2014) conducted a review on studies assessing how women’s magazines across Asian and Middle Eastern societies change as the possible outcome of western influences. She reviewed studies conducted in the context of Turkey, China, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India and Pakistan and concluded that women’s magazines reflect, to a certain extent, global expansion of western media. As such, some of the magazines project western women and western social values. Yet at the same time, these magazines also indicate some of the transformations occurring within the local social landscapes. This includes the effort to catalyse changes by educating and empowering women. Siddiqui’s review is consistent with the earlier discussion suggesting media in general and women’s magazines in particular, are part of the “social forces and power relations” that continue to reflect and shape cultural norms and expectations.

We also argue that the stories related to the cover pages of women’s magazines are the means to dictate women on how to act and behave in society. When stories are related to women’s positions and roles in their social environment, they are indeed teaching women about appropriate behaviours and actions. In this paper, we examined how these cover page stories outline how women should behave in relation to their social roles. In this study, we specifically analysed messages related to women’s relationships.

## **Women's relationships**

In her book *Lenses of Gender*, Sandra Litzpit Bem (1993) proposes that society has a distinct mode of looking at gender that in turn influences the experience of both men and women. The lenses can be seen as hidden assumptions of how society views sex and gender. For example, androcentrism or male centeredness tends to define males and male's experience as a neutral and standard form and females and female's experience as sex specific and therefore deviates from the norm (Bem, 1993). Gender polarization on the other hand refers to the process of organizing social life of a culture in terms of male/female differences. Both hidden lenses function at the abstract level of constructing reality including how both genders relate to people around them. This in turn influences how men and women relate to others around them and create gender difference in how they view and carry out their role in society.

Perhaps one of the key evidences for gender difference related to relationships is the distinctive roles played by fathers and mothers. Many researchers recognised that parental nurturance and involvement between mothers and fathers are not the same (Adamsons & Beuhler, 2007; Finley, 2008). Fathers are generally seen to be acting as the provider of the family, playing the part of the disciplinarian figure (Adamsons & Beuhler, 2007). Mothers usually place higher value on their children's happiness, try harder to understand their children, and also tend to enjoy the relationship with their children more than fathers do. They tend to be greatly involved in all domains of their children's lives except as income providers (Finley, 2008). This highlights an important gender differences related to parenting (Ooi, Hashim & Endut, 2010). Unique roles as carried out by fathers and mothers in turn symbolise how gender roles, particularly those related to parenting, are conceptualized and practiced within a society.

Women in general have more intimate social relationships and tend to request and offer more support during stressful situations (Schraedley, Gotli & Hayward, 1999; Martinez-Hernaez et al., 2016). Nash (2002) reported mothers as having a strong sense of intimacy and belonging in relationships with their children. In a study to compare the interpersonal relationships of mothers working inside and outside home, sources of relationship for them appeared to come from 5 major categories; husbands, children, parents and parents in laws, siblings and siblings in-law, and friends and neighbors (Hashim, 2010). The pattern can also be observed among working mothers. It is likely that their hectic lifestyle that centers on family does not allow for many interactions to be formed with other people who are not family members. The same hectic lifestyle was likely to affect both groups of women.

However, there was also some evidence that although both groups have generally comparable social network, mothers working outside home reported slightly higher quality of interactions with people other than their family members. More working mothers reported friends to be in higher categories compared to stay-at-home mothers. The findings suggested how women's relationships still revolve around family in which they still play the nurturant role, caring for people around them (Hashim, 2010). This is consistent with the traditional gender roles of femininity that is so different from men.

## **This study**

The above discussion highlights how women's relationships are shaped by the cultural lenses and tend to be defined in masculinity term. In that case, women's gendered roles such as mothers, wives, daughters continued to be important and to be portrayed more strongly in women's magazines. This is the hypothesis of this study. Combining relationship's research and media studies, this paper examined cover pages and cover stories of two highly popular and widely circulated women's lifestyle magazines in Malaysia; *Nona* and *Wanita*.

## **2. Methodology**

This paper presented content analysis of two highly popular and widely circulated women's lifestyle magazines in Malaysia; *Nona* and *Wanita*. The women's magazines: The two magazines analyzed – *Nona and Wanita*,– are generally about how to be a 'woman' as prescribed by norms and culture. These magazines basically promote the ideal woman. Through its monthly editorial content and topics, the magazines propagate the lifestyle of a successful, married, working, caregiving and understanding woman.

*Nona's* contents are: Buletin Cantik (beauty products and beauty), Buletin Fesyen (fashion), Wanita Cemerlang (lifestyle), Fesyen Editorial (fashion), Tip Fesyen (fashion) and Rencana (includes a variety of feature stories and mostly on beauty, fashion and beauty products). *Wanita's* contents are: Fashion, features on successful women, beauty, accessories, advice columns and issues on relationships with men. *Wanita* is the longest survived women's magazine in Malaysia, more than 50 years. Both magazines are targeted at urban readership between the ages of 25 and 45 years old.

The analysis focused on the period between January 2016 and June 2016. In this study, we used qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis refers to any techniques in making inferences systematically and objectively by identifying specific characteristics of a message (Holsti, 1968). It uses semiological approach that is relatively less structured than quantitative analysis. This method is more interested in the underlying structure of the content of communication rather than the frequency of the data.

## **3. Results**

### **Analysis of the data**

Analysis of the data can be divided into cover picture, cover text and the related story inside the magazine.

### **The picture**

Cover page of the two magazines portrayed women who were successful, talented, and attractive and held prominent positions in the society. They included businesswomen (6), actresses/singers (5) and politicians/activists (1). They generally posed in nurturing, family oriented positions that included posing with spouse/partner, family members, and children or with other women. All poses accentuate the feminine aspects of their physical appearance. When posed with men, women appeared to take a secondary position. Pose of strong women were shown in more masculine, less desirable position.

### **The text on the cover**

The text describing the cover picture suggests that the relationship theme is prominent. The women in the cover pages are described according to their relationship roles as mothers, daughters, wives, girlfriends or friends. In cases when these women were singles, they were portrayed as looking for relationships.

### **The story**

All of the stories had reference to women's relationships and again their gendered roles that include their positions as mothers, daughters, wives, girlfriends and friends. Most prominently were their roles as wives and mothers. For example the interview always included questions related to their roles as mothers, whether current, previous or future. For single women, the focus was on the role in future (e.g. what kind of husbands they are looking for, what kind of mothers they will be).

Table 1: Text on the cover on *Nona* and *Wanita*

Magazine	Date	Original text in Malay Language	Translated English Text
Nona	Jan 2016	Young Couple and Elegant Mom	Young Couple and Elegant Mom
	Feb 2016	Kami berputar dalam paksi yang sama	We go round in the same axes
	March 2016	Tiada rasa cemburu, iri hati, mahupun curigai	No jealousy or suspicion
	April 2016	Takrif Cinta Neelofa	Definition of Love for Neelofa
	May 2016	Ibu Permata Hati	Mom, the jewel of the heart
	June 2016	Ekklusif bersama Tun Dr Mahathir, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir	Exclusive interview with Tun Dr Mahathir, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir
Wanita	Jan 2016	Comeback - gegar persada seni	Comeback – shaking the art scene
	Feb 2016	Tersuka tanpa sengaja	Unplanned attraction
	March 2016	Ulangtahun kelahiran Ayda Jebat	Ayda Jebat’s Birthday
	April 2016	Mahar Cinta Fathia	Dowry of love for Fathia
	May 2016	The new Liyana Jasmay (cameo Sofia dan Selena)	The new Liyana Jasmay (cameo Sofia dan Selena)
	June 2016	Rahsia kejayaan Dato’ Seri Vida	The secret behind the success of Dato’ Seri Vida

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

From the analysis, women in the cover pages of these two magazines continue to be presented in traditional, patriarchal gender roles including being nurturant and submissive with emphasis on their sexuality. This is in spite of them holding non-traditional social roles as providers and representing success stories of women in public domain. This is indeed reflecting what Bem describes as lenses of gender (1993). Being nurturant and submissive are part of society’s hidden assumptions about women and these expectations with regards to women’s characters are still being communicated despite the portrayal of story about successful women in Malaysia.

In addition, women’s relationships continued to be portrayed in relation to their traditional roles as mothers, wives, daughters. This is consistent with the kind of relationships women reported as important to them (Hashim, 2010). Indeed the story related on the cover pages of women’s magazines are representing and at the same time teaching women about appropriate behaviours and actions, and in this case, the appropriate relationships to have.

What can be learnt from the present study is that the conservative and the prevailing traditional perception of women’s role in society is still at large within the society in general and media industry in particular. Women are presented within the parameters that have been maintained for centuries and continue to be practiced daily. Hence, this kind of high level gender discrimination, gender oppression, degrading perceptions of women and women portrayal as second class citizens in the news organizations influenced the advancement of women toward higher positions. Women aspired to be successful in their career may still be bounded by their traditional roles as nurturing and submissive women and this in turn can have impacts on their development unlike their male colleagues.

In essence, the study has demonstrated that all the magazines analyzed propagate women’s traditional roles within the society’s mindset and blatant sex and sexuality about women. The analysis provides support that gender roles and cultural expectations continue to

shape people's social experiences and they shape and at the same time enhanced by the representations as appeared in mass media.

## 5. Acknowledgement

This research was funded by Universiti Sains Malaysia's Research University Grant PCOMM 1001/816255 Communicating Gender: A Construction Of Gender Identities In The Malaysian Women And Men Magazines.

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