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ATTITUDE and Identity Categorizations: A Corpus-based Study of Gender Representation

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Abstract

“Identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler 1998: 25). This study examines verbal expressions of gender identities in online personal ads by Malaysian adults. This paper focuses on methodological issues that demonstrate the ways in which themes relating to gender are represented in a corpus of online personals collected from my.match.com. This concern is explored from a social semiotic perspective and aims to present a systematic and replicable linguistic analytical framework for analyzing identity construction in a corpus of texts, both quantitative and qualitatively, based on a combination of systemic functional linguistics frameworks (Halliday 1994; Martin & White 2005), social actor categorization (van Leeuwen 2008) and corpus linguistic tools (Scott 2004; O’Donnell 2008). Features of identity categorization and attitudinal expressions were identified and qualitatively analyzed in relation to femininity and masculinity. The systematic contrasts between identity categorizations and ATTITUDE types construe distinguishing semantic themes, which define one type of gender identity in opposition to another. As such this study is a contribution to scholars working in the area of gender, discourse analysis and social semiotics as it demonstrates the interaction of identity categorizations and attitudinal expressions through a corpus-based analysis of personal ad texts.

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1. Introduction

This study explores the construction of gender identity in online personal advertisements by single Malaysian adults. In examining the range of resources that are used in constructing identities, the data is examined from a social semiotic perspective and specifically focuses on how femininity and masculinity are discursively performed in their verbal description.

A personal advertisement (hereafter personal ad) constitutes a distinct generic form, which is related to the small ad family of genres. While small ads traditionally offer a thing (e.g. a car) or a service (e.g. plumbing), the personal ad ‘offers but, most essentially, seeks’ (Shalom 1997) a romantic partner. The identity or persona of the

advertiser thus becomes a commodified entity (e.g. Benwell & Stokoe 2006; Coupland 1996; Baker 2003). Each construed identity is an offer that is traded for what is sought after in the dating scene. Advertisers compete for the time and effort of the other members to read their profiles and eventually respond to them. With this aim in mind, advertisers are pushed into crafting a description that will showcase their identities and communicate their desires in ways that they believe will help them achieve this objective. Self-description thus becomes one of the tools of persuasion manipulated to incite a response and affiliate with potential partners. Linguistic resources, namely nominal groups, comprise a significant part of self-presentation strategies among these advertisers as they manage and classify their online personae. Coupled with the frequent deployment of first person pronouns, identity description becomes a complex intimate process of revealing personal attributes to strangers on the website. Given the self-promotional nature of the personal advertisement genre, personal attributes are also positively evaluated in written descriptions. Evaluative expressions are therefore common as one of the key resources used for promoting identity. Thus, in addition to analysing the resources that are used to categorize identity, I will also be examining the types of attitudinal resources used in tandem. This paper is concerned with the way language is used in Malaysian personal ads to construct feminine and masculine identities – to represent parts of their personal and social identities that consequently become an important part of affiliation strategies with other my.match.com members.

2. Feminine and Masculine identities

The identity that we develop based on our gender identification as a man or woman is termed ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. In this study, following Stets and Burke (2000: 1), femininity and masculinity are defined as one’s gendered identity, which refers to the degree to which individuals see themselves as being masculine or feminine, given what it means to be a man or woman in a specific community. For example, being the breadwinner of the family, or fit, muscular and sporty are two common types of masculinity (Baker 2003, 2005), whereas being emotional, caring, slim and attractive is the typical displays of femininity (Williams 2007). Because these behaviours are culturally defined and constructed, masculinity and femininity are fluid and malleable concepts. The fact that these constructions are not innate means that what is represented as being masculine and feminine may well vary culturally and socially, as well as generationally (Baker 2003). More importantly, behaviours and attitudes associated with being masculine and feminine may be performed, embodied and embraced by both men and women. In other words, men can and do display feminine characteristics such as being emotionally expressive and sensitive, and some women may and do exhibit masculine traits such as being muscular, dominant and aggressive. In any community of practice, some forms of masculine and feminine acts tend to be more typical. These behaviours are thus perceived as the normative standards of masculinity and femininity (e.g. Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Baker 2008). However, these typically represent only some members of the male and female communities. Diversity in personalities – in behaviour, beliefs and attitude – of each individual man and woman naturally creates competing ways of performing masculinity and femininity, leading to the concept of pluralized masculinities and femininities (e.g. Bordo 1999; Baker 2008). Gender forms the crux of this study, this will be explored in relation to the advertisers’ performances of feminine and masculine identities. The following section describes the resources for construing identities and the methods for analysing them.

2.1 Nouns and adjectives in personal ads

A densely packed description of the self forms one distinctive feature of a personal ad, brought about by word and spatial constraints imposed in both written and online personals. Identity description is characterized by strings of adjectives and nouns (Bruthiaux 1994) forming what is termed a nominal group, as illustrated by the two examples taken from my data.

*I am a **single lady, sensual, cool, attractive, romantic and a good looking girl...***
*I am a **friendly, understandable and straight forward person***

Caldas-Coulthard and Moon (2010) argued that the nominal group is ‘an economical way of packaging information’, representing what writers consider relevant and interesting, as well as reflecting values and stereotypes implicit in their discourse. Accordingly, nominal groups in personal ads provide one point of departure for the investigation of gender representations in my study and they will be analyzed for their frequency and usage in the corpus.

2.2 The first person pronoun ‘I’ in personal ads

The use of *I* is significant in my corpus as it forms the second and third most frequently used word by men and women in their free-description. Its initial position in a clause gives thematic prominence to the writer and evokes a sense of proximity between the advertiser and the readers. Based on its high frequency, *I* forms the second point of departure in the analysis of gender identities in my set of data. A close analysis of I-statements in my data reveal distinctive semantic patterns related to the ways in which feminine and masculine identities are construed in terms of behavior, emotion and attributes. For example, the I-statements below reveal that leisure interests are described as the object of happiness by the men and women. As positive feelings are expressed, what the advertisers are also constructing are different social categorizations based on leisure activities.

I enjoy movies.

I like computer, tech stuff and books.

I love the outdoors.

3 Methodology

The methodology involves a combination of corpus linguistic techniques and discourse analysis of texts. The corpus of 65,659 words requires the use of a large-scale computerized corpus analysis method, a semi-automated small-scale corpus analysis and manual analysis of patterns of linguistic resources. Linguistic features are grouped according ATTITUDE from systemic functional discourse semantics (Martin & White 2005) and discourse-analytical concepts from social actor categorization (van Leeuwen 2008). The data are processed and annotated using a corpus software program called Wordsmith (Scott 2004). Frequency lists and concordance results will form the basis upon which discursive themes are determined, construing different types of online gendered identities.

3.1. Social Actor categorization

Two discourse-analytical concepts from social actor analytical framework (van Leeuwen 2008) are utilized in the semantic sub-classifications of I-statement and nominal group. These are ‘functionalisation’ and ‘identification’. Functionalisation occurs when “people are defined in terms of an activity, in terms of something they do, for instance an occupation or role” (van Leeuwen 2008: 42). Realizations of functionalisation include the following resources:

Nouns, formed from verbs, through suffixes such as –er, -ant, -ent, -ian, -ee, for example, *primary school teacher, a photographer, spaceman executive, dancer, choreographer etc.*

A noun that denotes a place or tool closely associated with an activity (in Halliday’s term ‘the range’ of the activity) through suffixes such as –ist, -eer, for example, *support engineer.*

The compounding of nouns denoting places or tools closely associated with an activity and highly generalized categorizations such as man, woman, person, as in *cameraman* and *businesswoman.*

Besides occupational roles, my data show a further subset of roles and activities that relate to leisure. Leisure roles (e.g. *a pianist and violinist*) and activities (e.g. *I can salsa a little*) are particularly prominent in my data, and these features will be my addition to van Leeuwen's functionalisation category.

Identification occurs when "people are defined not in terms of what they do but in terms of what they, more or less permanently or unavoidably, are" (van Leeuwen 2008: 42). There are three types of identification: classification, relational identification and physical identification.

1. Classification refers to major categories such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on.
2. Relational identification is identification by means of personal, kinship or work relations with others such as: *friend, parents, brother, sister etc.*
3. Physical identification represents people in terms of physical characteristics e.g. *long hair, tall, fit and attractive.*

Caldas-Coulthard and Moon (2010) extended van Leeuwen's types of identification to include the 'personal' type, comprising for example emotional, behavioral, intellect and morality, all of which are particularly prominent in their corpus.

3.2 ATTITUDE

ATTITUDE (Martin and White 2005) is a system of interpersonal meanings which offers an analytical framework to systematically identify and classify attitudinal expressions. This study focuses on inscribed expressions of ATTITUDE used to evaluate identities.

Attitudinal expressions can be categorised into 3 different types – AFFECT (expressions of emotion), JUDGEMENT (evaluation of behaviour) and APPRECIATION (evaluation of things). The first distinction in analyzing ATTITUDE is made between positive [+] and negative [-] expressions. In the following examples, the words in bold are identified as representing positive or negative value (indicated in square brackets).

*I am a **sweet-looking** [+] and **lovely** [+] girl.*
*I am and always will be a little **fat** [-]...*

AFFECT is concerned with expressions of emotions and is frequently expressed in personal ads to describe positive and negative dispositions and reactions to people, activities and things. What follows are examples of positive and negative affect taken from the corpus, with affect annotated in bold.

*I **like** [+] travelling and would really **love** [+] to travel to Nepal someday for its beautiful scenery.*
*I am **happy** [+] with who I am...*

JUDGEMENT specifically refers to attitudinal evaluation of human behavior, which can be distinguished between "personal judgements of admiration or criticism and moral judgements of praise or condemnation" (Martin & Rose 2003). Personal judgements of admiration or criticism further sub-classified as judgements of NORMALITY (how unusual or special someone is), CAPACITY (how capable someone is) and TENACITY (how resolute someone is). Moral judgements of praise and condemnation are sub-classified as judgements of VERACITY (how truthful someone is) and PROPRIETY (how ethical someone is). The following are examples of positive and negative judgements found in the data. Realizations of judgement are in bold.

*I am a **geek** [- norm], who is **expert** [+ cap] in computing.*
*I am **sincere** [+prop], **loyal** [+ten], **truthful** [+ver], **caring** [+prop], **friendly** [+norm] person*

APPRECIATION typically involves evaluation of appearance or physical traits in the data, for example *I am a **handsome** guy*, "In general terms appreciation can be divided into our 'reactions' to things (do they catch our

attention; do they please us?), their ‘composition’ (balance and complexity), and their ‘value’ (how innovative, authentic, timely, etc).” (Martin & White 2005). Below are examples of REACTION, COMPOSITION and VALUATION found in the corpus.

*I am a very **healthy** [+reac] and **fit** [+ reac] guy.*

*I think communication is a very **important** [+ val] element in a relationship.*

The following section presents and discusses the results of the analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Stereotypical performances of masculinity and femininity are common in the data, forming the dominant forms of gender identities. On the other hand, contesting forms are also present in the data. While these are gendered Malaysian identities, constructions are found to correlate with other types of masculinities and femininities found in earlier research (e.g. Lazar 2006). Two types of masculine identities based on the frequency of identity categorisations and attitudinal features are 1) The fit and athletic man and 2) The sensitive new age man. Two dominant types of feminine identities found in the women’s data are 1) The affectionate woman and 2) The empowered woman. These identities are characterized by different types and combinations of discourses; these are the discourse of appearance (i.e. size, attractiveness, fitness), of occupation (i.e. achievements, activities and roles), of emotion (i.e. happiness and affective personality), of behaviour and different types of interests (e.g., sports and socialising). Using the tools of corpus linguistics, these resources cluster into patterns of linguistic behaviour construing the abovementioned masculine and feminine identities

4.1 Masculinities in Malaysian personals

The two main masculine themes that have emerged are discourses of 1) appearance and fitness and 2) emotion and domesticity. Patterns of realizations and discourse themes construing the masculine themes are described in the following sections.

4.1.1 The fit and athletic man

Semi-automated analysis of the men’s personal ads have revealed frequent displays of physical strength and confidence realized through leisure activities associated with competence and mastery. Physicality and fitness are two themes construing a common form of masculinity in the corpus – the fit and athletic man. Functionalisation forms the typical mode of characterizing the fit and athletic men in the texts. There is more than double the number of sporting instances (clauses and nominal group combined) in the men’s personal ads (323 instances) than in the women’s (140 instances). Similar to the working man, the fit and athletic are frequently construed as doers of activities or as someone with ascribed sporting attributes. The following are instantiations of this feature.

(I) play sports games

I engage a lot in outdoor activities

It is worth noting that leisure is four times more frequently attributed, via relational attributive clause, to the men (14 instances) than the women (3 instances) by means of attributive and relational possessive process with them as the carrier of attributive qualities in the form of nominal group, as shown in the clauses below. The statements define them in terms of who they are based on their sports interests, which consequently also classify them as belonging to and being a part of a particular sporting community.

*I am a former state badminton's player when in secondary school,
I am a diehard fan of basketball*

More dominant however are displays of AFFECT in the ads involving emotive expressions. The advertisers frequently represent themselves as emotional sensors and reactors (as persons who emotionally reacts) to sporting stimulus realized through affective states such as *like*, *love* and *enjoy*. Athleticism among the men therefore is not only constructed by means of doing activities to keep fit and healthy, but as results revealed, it is often about *liking*, *loving* and *enjoying* whatever sporting activities they are engaged in.

*I like martial art... but not to fight...
I love to swim, most of the swimming pools in Klang Valley area i did pay a visit.
I enjoy playing tennis, swimming, hiking and outdoor activities.*

The discourse of appearance is very distinct in a number of the male adverts. Several adjectives are used as Pre-modifiers to represent the athletic masculine man (e.g. *fit*, *healthy*, *athletic-built body*, *toned*). Instantiations also include inscribed declarations of height and weight (e.g. *I am 6'1, tall*, *My height is around 178cm*). Corpus evidence reveals that the word *tall* is often tendered by the male subjects. Being *tall* is a bonus for a man; research has shown that taller men's ads get more responses than those who are smaller in stature (Lynn & Shurgot 1984). Higher responses are clearly suggesting that being tall is a desirable quality in a man. The adjective *tall* (and its numeral equivalent such as *I am 175cm tall*) does not only construe a physically tall man, but it is also implying a desirable male persona. In the 'metaphorical marketplace of romance and relationship' (Benwell & Stokoe 2006), *tall* is axiologically loaded with positive value; it invokes positive appreciation of its carrier. The frequent tendering of the trait appear to suggest that some of the advertisers are aware of the value it carries, and are playing up on the word, by offering it as a bond to affiliate with women.

4.1.2 The sensitive new age man

The second type of masculinity is constructed through the discourses of emotion and domestic activities. As opposed to the first masculine type, identification forms the typical mode of characterization for the sensitive new age man. Personality takes centre stage in descriptions and the advertisers are generally construed as carriers of inherent attributes realized typically by attributive relational clause *I^am/'m^Attribute*. Descriptions of social-relational behaviors, i.e. traits involving interaction with other people, dominate the discourse. Frequency analysis revealed that the adjective *caring* and the nominal group *good listener* make up the two most common personality traits tendered by the men as shown in the examples below.

*I am happy, caring, outgoing, love to listen, like to joke around, compassionate, understanding, open, trustworthy, and extremely honest (probably too much so).
I am a good listener*

Frequency analysis shows that the word *caring* is the most frequently tendered trait among the male subjects. McMahon (1998) remarked that terms such as *sensitivity*, *caring* and *compassionate* in the New Man discourse appear to allow them to occupy the space opened up by women in their demands for change and partnership in relationships. Based on the concept of partnership, the sensitive man is also characterized by his participation in domestic work, child-caring and upbringing and shared responsibility in earning a living (McMahon 1998). Results of semi-automated analysis have revealed frequent clausal instances of domesticity built on interests in domestic activities such as cooking, gardening and doing house work.

*I like **cooking**, it is fun and it is a way to release stress of works.*

*I enjoy **gardening**...I have Thai basil, Italian basil, kaffir lime leaves, ladies fingers, curry leaves and a barren papaya tree.*

The sensitive man is also construed by virtue of his emotion. This form of masculinity embraces emotionality and is characterised by his explicit display of positive affection. Overt expressions of positive emotion towards domestic processes are demonstrated below.

*I still **enjoy** spending my free time at home with my fishes and house work,*

*I **like** all sorts of stuffs, from indoor to outdoor activities, cuddling on sofa on a weekend watching desperate housewives*

Covert declarations of sensitive masculinity are occasionally made in the personal ads. Inscribed judgment of TENACITY in words such as *passionate* and *die hard romantic*, functions as a form of identity classification. Accordingly, positive TENACITY defines one aspect of the sensitive man identity.

*I am a **passionate** person and am quite open to suggestions on how to improve the relationship.*

*I am a **die hard romantic at heart**...*

If the above examples represent the ‘being’ of a sensitive man, then the following extract demonstrates the ‘doing’ of sensitive. The sensitive man is intent on invoking relational and material capacity through inscribed AFFECT and material processes related to romance:

*I **would love to listen to her** daily life activities such as work, play & family,*

*I **love public show of affection** which would include **hugging** and possibly **kissing**.*

As the project of heterosexual masculinity demands men’s rejection of effeminacy (Holland et al. 1993), the results of my analysis have demonstrated the opposite. Despite the tension projected by hegemonic male convention and the pressure to conform to traditional masculine values, the sensitive men appear to revel in the joys of cooking, of wooing a woman and of tending to her needs.

4.2 Femininities in Malaysian personals

Overall, patterns of linguistic resources come together to create several discursive themes construing typical and atypical representations of femininities based on 1) appearance and positive APPRECIATION and 2) behaviours based on positive judgements of CAPACITY, TENACITY and NORMALITY. Two dominant types of feminine identities found in the women’s data are 1) The compassionate woman and 2) the empowered woman.

4.2.1 The compassionate woman

Coates (1996) noted that a discourse construing traditional femininity is typically marked by collaborative features of talk such as giving compliments and co-constructing a shared world. The presence of cooperative features in women’s speech has led Tannen (1990) to label it ‘rapport talk’, contrasting with the ‘report talk’ of men. Examining the adjectives that are used to construe identities, many are articulating a commitment to the above feminine tradition with respect to the conventions of female rapport and empathy that they are

reproducing. Descriptions of positive behavioural traits dominate the discourse, specifically of social-relational qualities, which are traits involving interaction or relationship with other people.

I am an easygoing, caring, understanding person..

I am sincere, loyal, truthful, caring, jovial, friendly, humorous, very loving and a romantic person.

Representations of positive mental CAPACITY (i.e. how social-relationally capable they are) through *understanding, good listener*, of positive TENACITY (i.e. how dependable they are) through *loyal* and *faithful*, of positive VERACITY (i.e. how honest they are through *truthful* and *sincere*) and positive PROPRIETY (i.e. how decent and compassionate they are through *kind* and *caring*) demonstrate the women's people-orientedness, suggesting a strong concern for others and their feelings. What these go on to perpetuate are expectations that have long been the feature of femininity – that women are supposed to care about others.

If the above attributive relational clauses represent the 'being' of a compassionate woman, then the following behavioural clauses below demonstrate the 'doing' of compassion. Material processes such as *help to handle problems, teach and inspire, moulding and nurturing* invoke compassionate and caring qualities. From assuming responsibility for young children to coping with people in general, these statements display the pervasiveness of hands-on caring. Actions that foreground social-relations therefore play an important part in building the identity of the compassionate woman.

I m also a part-time counselling teacher who helps pupils to handle their problems in school

Moulding and nurturing the future generation

Believes in...dealing with ppl with compassion.

The compassionate women are realized through a repertoire of care, that is, through their tendering of social-psychological traits inscribing CAPACITY, TENACITY, PROPRIETY and VERACITY with regard to others in the contexts of relationships. Femininity has traditionally been about accommodating others and being sensitive to others needs. What the verbiage has revealed are not only inscriptions of qualities but more significantly a variety of processes that are construing agency in the creation of individualised feminine selves. These women are actively performing and engaging in the work of femininity and they seem to take pleasure in the adoption and performance of the compassionate feminine role.

4.2.2 The empowered woman

The empowered woman is commonly represented in the corpus. Results show patterns of linguistic resources demonstrating distinct ways of performing empowerment through assertiveness and self-reliance. Words such as *open-minded* and *optimistic* represent positive CAPACITY associated with mental strength and flexibility, while attributes such as *outgoing* and *aggressive* are associated with affability and boldness.

As opposed to the narrative of the slim and attractive woman, the assertive and independent woman is characterised by social-psychological qualities inscribing positive TENACITY and CAPACITY through her occupational activities and roles, her educational achievements and her joy in performing robust leisure activities. Findings show that functionalisation forms the typical socio-semantic mode of characterizing these women. They use significantly more identity categorisation by means of what they do and what role they assume in their textual descriptions. The frequent occupational as well as educational functionalisation suggests that empowered women are generally construed as doers of activities and performers of institutional and leisurely roles. The examples below demonstrate positive CAPACITY by means of occupational activities and roles.

*I am a dance instructor/dancer/choreographer/rhythmic gymnastics coach
I'm managing the company's branding and marketing communications efforts dealing with target audiences globally.*

Representations of empowered women are also realized through identification statements through attributive relational clauses. As the examples below illustrate, social-psychological qualities construe the essence of mental (and occasionally physical) CAPACITY and TENACITY among these women.

*I am **intelligent, inquisitive and optimistic** (sometimes)...
I am sincere, helpful, **responsible, energetic, independent, outgoing**, sociable and **self-motivated** person.*

Positive CAPACITY is linked to educational attainment through the appropriation of discourses of literacy and education. If the men's success is ideationally construed by means of attributive possessives (e.g. *I have*, which encodes the meaning of academic/financial possession), these women appear to be more inclined towards perceiving achievement as a process-oriented experience rather than an object of possession. Functionalization through 'what activities they did' predominate in the construal of the women's educational achievement, as shown in the following examples:

*I took a double major in International Studies and Communications & Media at Monash University Australia.
I have also completed my MBA, am glad that I have successfully finished the 2-year battle of cramming the head!*

Woods (2007) noted a theme, triggered by societal expectations, running through the discourse of women interviewed in articulating their femininity. This theme involved having it all – of having the capacity to be a 'superwoman'. To be a superwoman it is not enough to just have a career; one also must be adept in other skills such as homemaking, entertaining and maintaining a relationship. Among these women, the act of being on my.match.com is an overt articulation of interest in having a relationship. Performed together with what they explicitly profess to be able to do and know how to do mentally, materially and behaviourally, these verbal acts construe empowered femininity. Empowerment is thus about multi-tasking, enunciated in terms of agency. Agency is understood as the ability to exercise their autonomy and control over their lives (Woodward 2004). This agentive capacity, as shown in the following instances, demonstrates the women's instrumentality and self-determination through a variety of material processes such as *learn, doing, working* and etc.

*Someday i **plan to quit** my job, **open** my own cafe/bookstore so I **can do** the two things i love at the same time.
Besides **working**, I am also **doing** my doctorate of business administration in Multimedia University.*

5. Conclusion

The combination of Appraisal, social actor categorization framework and corpus linguistic techniques employed in this study was used in the pursuit of discovering the expressions of gender identity in online personal ads. General patterns construing typical and atypical representations of gender identities were observed by comparing the structures, semantics and collocates revealed through the analyses of I-statements and nominal groups. Close analysis of these linguistic items have demonstrated how the verbal mode of identity construal - conditioned by the demands of the genre, affected by the interpersonal demands of courtship initiation - can construe a range of identity categorizations, interpersonally enact a variety of attitudes and holistically produce a range of performances consisting of the stereotypical, the counter-stereotypical and the typically Malaysian. As

such this study is a contribution to scholars working in the area of gender identity and linguistics in so far as it identifies linguistic realizations of femininities and masculinities and demonstrates the interaction of the realizations through a corpus-based analysis of personal ad texts.

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