

‘Bite Your Tongue Sometimes’: A Study of Relationship Advice Columns in Online Women’s Magazines in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Women’s magazines have increasingly become the object of scrutiny among scholars as they are perceived as playing a very important role in shaping how women view themselves as well as how society views them. However, few studies, especially in the Asian context, focus on relationship advice articles which are often a staple in these publications. In this study, the problem-solution discourse schema categories of Machin and van Leeuwen was referred to in order to explore the kinds of problems and solutions that appear in the relationship advice articles in two home-grown English language women’s magazines in Malaysia. Both content analysis and discourse analysis were utilized to analyze the data. The findings reveal that although many of the categories of the original study were found in the Malaysian articles, some new categories were also present, thus suggesting that the choice of topics that are highlighted reflects global contemporary issues which are often ‘tempered’ for local consumption.

Keywords: Gender, Media, Malaysia, Women’s magazines, Relationship advice, Culture

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INTRODUCTION

From the first appearance of a publication directed specifically towards women in the late 17th century in Britain, women's magazines have now become a staple in the publishing world. According to Caldas-Coulthard (1996), they are attractive to women since "they are about being female and the problems of being female" (252). Women's magazines began to become an object of interest to scholars since the publication of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminist Mystique* from 1963. As a former writer for women's magazines, she was troubled by the image of blissful domesticity she was helping to propagate. In fact, during the 1950s, these publications emphasized the great importance of the role of women as housewives, who were often celebrated and praised. Two decades later, Janice Winship authored *Inside Women's Magazines* in 1987. She focused on *Cosmopolitan* magazine, which is one of the first women-oriented magazines to assert the right of women to enjoy sex and talk about it. She found that the magazine was consistently inconsistent in its message: "one article would encourage readers to be happy with their body size, whilst another would encourage slimming, men are given both sympathy and criticism, marriage might be endorsed or condemned, romance and fidelity might be good or bad, depending on the article; and the style might be serious or silly" (Gauntlett 2008, 58).

In current research on women's magazines, the majority of them focus on the representation of women and their gender roles in advertisements (Brown and Knight 2015; Zhao and Zhu 2015) or front covers (Conlin and Bissell 2014; Crusmac 2013). Fewer studies explore advice articles despite them being a staple in women's magazines from the time the first magazines were printed. This article specifically refers to articles found in many women's magazines in sections with headings such as 'Sex and Relationships' or 'Love and Sex'.

Morris (2007) states that these columns are often trivialized and treated as insignificant by society in general because they describe something considered to be merely 'girl-talk'; designed for amusement and entertainment, and the problems they represent are often viewed as "just as much a commodity as the magazines themselves" (308). However, she believes that they are very important since they include the very serious treatment of issues that focus on the socio-political discourse of the day. It is also important in the understanding of the relationship between private and public worlds. She states that in society in general, some problems are unfit for public discussion, thus advice articles regularly deal with private problems in a very public sphere and they provide unmediated access to the opinions and intimate lives of ordinary people. As they are dismissed as unimportant and target only women readers, greater freedom is thus given to their writers to broach awkward subjects (Morris 2007).

Among the relatively few studies of this genre are those by Farvid and Braun (2006) and Erjavec (2006) who examine how various magazines constructed and upheld commonly-held views of female sexuality in their advice articles. Other scholars investigate the linguistic constructions of advice articles (Conradie 2011; Lorensen 2012) while others explore the dominant themes of advice articles (Gill 2010; Machin and Thornborrow 2003). All the studies on advice articles cited here are located in Western contexts. Very little is known about this genre in women's magazines in non-Western contexts, especially in the Southeast Asian context, except for Lulu and Alkaff's (2018, 2019) cross-cultural research on advice articles in women's magazines.

Lulu and Alkaff (2018, 2019) examine various aspects of the relationship advice genre in women's magazines in three different cultural contexts, that is the US, the Middle East, and Malaysia. Research on women's magazines in Asian contexts predominantly focus on the messages they portray regarding women's appearances and women's gender roles, especially in advertisements (Alagappan and Selvaratnam 2014; Al Jenaibi 2011; Basnyat and Chang 2014; Feng and Karan 2011; Frith and Feng 2009; Khattab 2012; Yu, Park and Sung 2015; Zhao and Zhu 2015).

As there appears to be a relative dearth of studies on sex and relationship advice articles in women's magazines in the Asian context, including in Southeast Asia, we argue that this research is important as it will help provide a better understanding of the way advice articles in general and sex and relationship advice in particular are constructed in these publications. In relation to this, it may also generate a better understanding of the status of women in general and how female sexuality in particular are viewed in contemporary Malaysian society. At the very least, more scholarly attention is needed on this media form in Southeast Asia because, as pointed out by Mitchell (1998), "(h)istories of the region's mass media tend to overlook popular women's magazines" (249). Although more studies have been conducted into women's magazines in this region since Mitchell's time, as cited above, those on other aspects of these publications are very much needed. Thus, this research fills a significant gap that exists in the literature on women's magazines, especially in Southeast Asia.

This study examines relationship advice in two English language home-grown Malaysian women's magazines. 'Home-grown' magazines are defined as publications that are founded and published by companies in their respective countries with the local staff having total control of editorial policy. We believe that investigating these home-grown magazines will provide a better understanding of the values that they seek to promote in relation to the predominant values or norms of the society it is set in rather than analyzing local editions of international magazines. The latter probably reflects the ethos of the international publishing companies more than that of the local society, as asserted by some researchers (Kitsa and Mudra 2018; Machin and van Leeuwen 2003). In relation to this, Embong (2011) states that globalization has resulted in media, culture, and identity being "intricately intertwined, each impacting the other in complex ways" (11). With these facts in mind, the following research questions have been addressed by this article:

1. What kinds of problems and solutions are found in English language homegrown women's magazines in Malaysia?; and
2. To what extent do the articles reflect the local values or norms of Malaysian society in general?

WOMEN'S MAGAZINES IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a diverse society comprising different ethnic communities. Indigenous people, known as *Bumiputras* ('sons of the soil'), form 67.4% of the population. Of these, the Malay people form the biggest group. Ethnic Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%), and others (0.7%) form the rest of the country's population of 32 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020). Magazines in Malaysia are published in Malay, English, and Mandarin, the main languages of the country. Very few publications are published in Tamil or any of the languages of the Indian community due to the small size of the community. According to Shafizan Mohamed (2009), the first women's

magazine in Malaysia was published in the Malay language in 1930 by a teacher, Zainun Sulaiman. *Bulan Melayu* (*Malay Moon*) was published by the Association of Malay Teachers in Johor, Malaysia. This magazine was circulated to a limited audience, that is, mostly female teachers, due to the large number of women who were illiterate then. Later, other Malay language women's magazines which were published by several teachers' associations and edited by men appeared on the scene. The appearance of these publications can be seen as a reflection of the heightened awareness of Malaysian Malay women, especially teachers, on the significance of education and literacy among their people from the 1930s onwards.

However, after achieving independence in 1957, the Malaysian Malay women's magazine industry witnessed a slower pace of development as a result of three factors: (1) the change of location for most editors, writers, and publishing houses from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur after the war, which demanded a change in structure and distribution of magazines, (2) the change in writing script from Arabic (*Jawi*) to the Roman script, where publishers had to adapt to such changes, and (3) the rise of new media such as TV and radio which had an influence on the development of local magazines. Therefore, only two Malay language women's magazines were established in the 1960s, that is, *Puteri* (*Princess*) in 1962 and *Taman Wanita* (*Women's Garden*) in 1968 (Shafizan Mohamed 2009).

The 1970s, on the other hand, provided many conditions that helped the development of Malay language women's magazines in Malaysia such as political stability. *Wanita* (*Women*) and *Jelita* (*Beauty*), considered as the two most important Malay language women's magazines, were established during this period. The gradual changes in the socio-economic status of their readers from being predominantly housewives in the early 1970s to career women a decade later were reflected in the content of these magazines with articles on working women and career advice being increasingly featured by these publications. The following decades continued to witness a great increase in the number of women's magazines, with at least 30 magazines in circulation, including Chinese and English language ones. The former is targeted solely for the ethnic Chinese community with about a dozen titles currently in circulation. They are either home-grown publications or local editions of Hong Kong, Singaporean, or Taiwanese magazines. The latter also comprises either home-grown women's magazines such as *Her World* and *Female* or local editions of international magazines such as *Marie Claire* and *Elle*. Wang (2006) in her study that compares Malay and English language women's magazines in Malaysia finds that the content of Malay magazines is generally more conservative as they are targeted towards a mainly Malay-Muslim readership. The readership of the English language magazines, on the other hand, are mainly non-Malays and non-Muslims.

Although Malaysia is perceived to have greater media freedom compared to some of its neighbors in the region, the existence of a Publishing and Printing Act for publications meant that media practitioners generally tend to toe the line. Although censorship in Malaysia normally focuses on content deemed sensitive to political and religious matters, occasionally women's magazines, especially foreign magazines, are subjected to censorship through the blacking out of images or tearing of pages. Although much more risqué content is found online, these are not easily censored and often are not viewed as "official" publications, hence the object of scrutiny for the authorities remains publications with print editions requiring a printing permit as in the magazines analyzed in this study. A new government that came to power in 2018 has promised greater media freedom but, to date, the status quo remains. Another new government that came to power in March 2020

amidst the coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath will likely result in media reforms being sidelined for more urgent priorities.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

Two homegrown English-language women's magazines were selected for this study, namely, *Female* and *Her World*. *Female* has been described as Malaysia's top-selling lifestyle magazine while *Her World* is the first home-grown English language women's lifestyle magazine in Malaysia (<https://www.bluinc.com.my>). In Malaysia, English language women's magazines are read by women of all ages. Some titles such as *Marie Claire* and *Elle* are read by mostly younger women but the two magazines in this study are most likely read by a slightly older demographic as these magazines have been in the market for at least three decades and have attracted some loyal readers over time. However, English language magazines, regardless of the titles, often remain in the domain of mostly urban women who are exposed to the English language from school and/or work. The readers of these magazines also predominantly come from higher income brackets as exposure to the English language in Malaysia is often tied to private school education and/or work in the corporate sector where the use of English is emphasized more. The readers hail from all the major ethnic groups in Malaysia but Malaysian Chinese and Indian readers probably form a greater proportion of the readers as these two ethnic groups form the majority of the urban population, especially in the capital, Kuala Lumpur (*World Population Review* 2020).

The names of these two magazines, which are published monthly, are represented in the findings section of this paper through the use of initials for brevity. The sample size for this study is twenty articles, ten from each magazine, downloaded from the online websites of the respective magazines from the period 2016-2017. According to Sandelowski (1995), "(d)etermining adequate sample size in qualitative research is ultimately a matter of judgment and experience in evaluating the quality of the information collected against the uses to which it will be put, the particular research method and purposeful sampling strategy employed, and the research product intended" (179). Fugard and Potts (2014), on the other hand, recommend that qualitative studies require a minimum sample size of at least 12 to reach data saturation. Therefore, a sample of 20 articles was deemed sufficient for the qualitative analysis and scale of this study.

Only articles that were at least one-page long were selected. Articles on sexual health issues and personal narratives were excluded because the main focus of this study is relationship advice produced by the magazines. The articles were mostly written by female writers but a few articles did not include the names of the writers, thus, the gender of the writer is unknown. From the names stated, it is reasonable to assume that the writers are Malaysians rather than foreigners.

Data Analysis

This study adopts a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative dimensions of analysis. Following data collection, content analysis was utilized to identify the categories as defined by Machin and Van Leeuwen as well as to identify new categories based on

our examination of the texts. The most important stage of content analysis is coding. This involves firstly identifying the relevant articles according to certain codes. This is done by looking at keywords in the title or in the content of the article. After the initial coding, the data was then analyzed again by both researchers and a colleague together. The coding scheme was then further refined and agreed upon by all three coders. Although we did not use statistics to determine inter-coder agreement, we believe that sufficient measures and steps have been undertaken by the researchers to ensure reliability and validity of the coding schema. According to Tinsley and Weiss (2000), inter-rater (or inter-coder) agreement is important because it measures “the extent to which the different judges tend to assign exactly the same rating to each object” (98). This fact helped to reaffirm the belief that the frameworks that were conceived with the consensus of the coders was a sound one. A frequency count of the problem and solution categories in both magazines was then conducted (see Tables 3 and 4).

Discourse analysis was also used in this study to analyze the articles. Bennett (2015) is of the opinion that combining methods within a research project can allow the strengths of one method to offset the limitations of another. Although both research methods are text-based, discourse analysis generally focuses on qualitative analysis while content analysis involves both qualitative and quantitative analysis. “As in many potential pairings of qualitative and quantitative methods, a key potential benefit is that the qualitative side of the analysis can contribute to conceptual validity and an understanding of individual cases or texts, while the quantitative side can help identify cases or texts worthy of close study and address whether the findings of individual cases or texts are also evident in populations of cases or texts” (Bennett 2015, 986–87).

Machin and Van Leeuwen’s (2003) Framework

This study refers to the problem-solution discourse schema categories of Machin and van Leeuwen (2003) to explore the kinds of problems and solutions that appear in the Malaysian texts. They investigated feature and advice articles on a number of topics including work, relationships, and sexuality in several international editions of *Cosmopolitan*. They find that a ‘problem-solution’ discourse schema is used for all the articles analyzed, regardless of the topic. Using this schema, they investigated the kinds of problems and solutions that appear in the magazines. They found five problems and five solution categories that they claim are present in all the editions but are formulated in different ways across cultures. Thus, they state that despite the existence of “local accents,” the problem-solution discourse schema used by these magazines is a global one shared by all the editions (Machin and van Leeuwen 2003, 506). As discourse schemas in general are “interpretive frameworks... for understanding social practices,” the schema they developed is described as “a global model for the representation of social practices” and is viewed as “the dominant mode” used by women’s magazines for constructing reality (Machin and van Leeuwen 2003, 506–7). Their categories of problems and solutions are summarized as follows:

Problem Categories

1. *Unreliable Partners*: those who are close to us like our friends, lovers, and colleagues posing problems resulted from their essential unreliability or selfishness such as taking advantage of you, betraying you, plotting against you behind your back.

2. *Risky Encounters*: encountering or meeting with new people such as men making advances or new colleagues at work leads to problems which are always full of risks and require a wary attitude.
3. *Institutional Obstacles*: as a result of being in a male-dominated world, women face many difficulties such as the obstacle in getting promotion in work, gaining access to some places or activities, and achieving different forms of success.
4. *Lack of Confidence*: the problems faced by women result from their own inner feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence, and they are not caused by external factors. These feelings could be attributed to their work environment or related to their bodies or sexual competence.
5. *Sexual Dissatisfaction*: not achieving sexual satisfaction for some reason such as their insecurity is always problematic for women.

Solution Categories

1. *Acquiring Skills*: learning new skills is a frequently proposed solution; these skills might relate to self-presentation, and the intentional exploitation of women's attractiveness through dressing, seductive behavior, or even being well organized.
2. *Rejection*: when we deal with people whom we should not easily trust, this solution is a simple way to deal with such a problem by cutting off the relationship or withdrawing.
3. *Communication*: it is always a frequent solution for the problem 'Unreliable Partners' and it means 'talking things over'.
4. *Pleasing People*: when having problems with others (especially men) then the solution is pleasing them through some ways such as seductive behavior or flattery.
5. *Taking Control*: to take the initiative almost always related only to sexual problems.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the findings reveals that three of Machin and van Leeuwen's (2003) problem categories are found in *Her World*, which are, "Unreliable Partners", "Risky Encounters" and "Sexual Dissatisfaction" while "Risky Encounters" and "Sexual Dissatisfaction" are found in *Female*. In addition, two new problem categories, "Lack of Skills", and "Lack of Knowledge" are found in both magazines while an additional category "Institutionalized Bias" is found in *Female* only. With regard to the solutions, all five solution categories of Machin and van Leeuwen with an additional three new categories namely, "Acquiring Knowledge", "Taking Responsibility" and "Pleasing Oneself" are found in both magazines.

In addition, in some articles, there are main categories with subordinate categories nestled within the same article. The presence of new categories in our data can be explained by the fact that we focus exclusively on sex and relationship advice articles unlike Machin and van Leeuwen's study which examines advice articles on a range of topics including work, relationships, and sexuality. Tables 1 and 2 below show the problem-solution categories in each magazine.

Titles of Articles	Problem Category	Solution Category
1. 10 Things You Must Try For Mind-Blowing Sex	**Lack of Skills	+Acquiring Skills ++Taking Control ++Communication
2. 10 Ways to a Happier Marriage	**Lack of Skills	+Acquiring Skills ++Communication
3. 10 Secrets to a Successful Marriage	**Lack of Skills	+Acquiring Skills ++Pleasing People
4. 5 Tips to Bring the Spark Back to Your Relationship	+Sexual Dissatisfaction	+Acquiring Skills ++Pleasing People
5. Do Short Men Make Better Husbands?	**Lack of Knowledge	**Acquiring Knowledge
6. Should All Truths Be Shared Between Husband and Wife?	+Risky Encounters	+Communication
7. 7 Ways to Get In A Sexy Mood	**Lack of Skills	+Acquiring Skills **Pleasing Oneself
8. 4 Things You Never Knew About Men and Sex	**Lack of Knowledge	**Acquiring Knowledge
9. 5 Tricks To Spice Up Your Sex Life	+Sexual Dissatisfaction	+Acquiring Skills ++Communication ***Pleasing Oneself
10. Would You Snoop On Your Boyfriend's Phone While He's Asleep?	+Unreliable Partners ++Risky Encounter	**Taking Responsibility ++Rejection

Table 1: Problem-solution categories in *Her World*

*New problem categories/ New solution categories

+ Main Category

++ Subordinate Category

Titles of articles	Problem Category	Solution Category
11. How to Impress Anyone in 60 Seconds	**Lack of Skills	+Acquiring Skills
12. 7 Things A Man Should Not Do to A Woman	**Lack of Knowledge	**Acquiring Knowledge
13. Can A Woman and Man JUST Be Close Friends?	+Risky Encounters **Institutionalized Bias	**Taking Responsibility
14. 5 Unexpected Things That Can Turn A Man On In Bed	**Lack of Knowledge	**Acquiring knowledge ++Acquiring Skills ++Taking Control ++Communication
15. 15 Things You Can Do To Enrich Your Life	**Lack of Skills	+Acquiring Skills ++Pleasing People ***Pleasing Oneself
16. 5 Things You REALLY Need to Tell Your Man for Great Sex	*Institutionalized Bias	+Communication
17. 9 Surprising Ways You Can Ooze Sexiness	**Lack of Skills	+Acquiring Skills ***Pleasing Oneself
18. Here's How Women Can have More Sex With Their Man	+Sexual Dissatisfaction	**Acquiring Knowledge
19. Juicy Read: "It's Just Casual Sex..."	+Risky Encounters	**Taking Responsibility
20. 5 naughty Games to sizzle Things Up in Bed	+Sexual Dissatisfaction	+Acquiring Skills ++Communication

Table 2: Problem-solution categories in *Female*

*New problem categories/ New solution categories

+ Main Category

++ Subordinate Category

Meanwhile, Figures 1 and 2 show the frequency count of both categories in the two magazines.

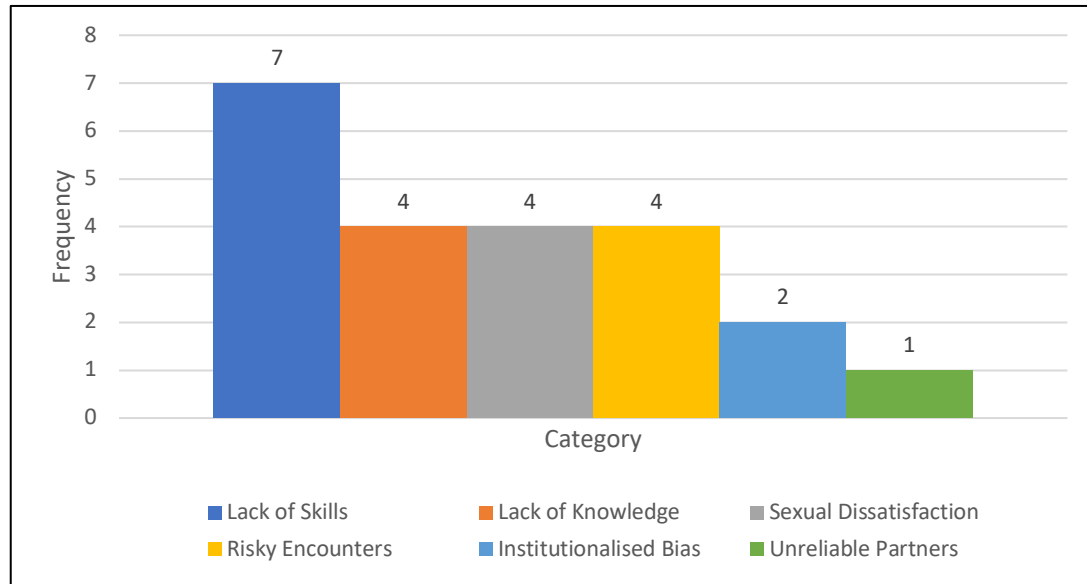


Figure 1: Frequency count of problem categories

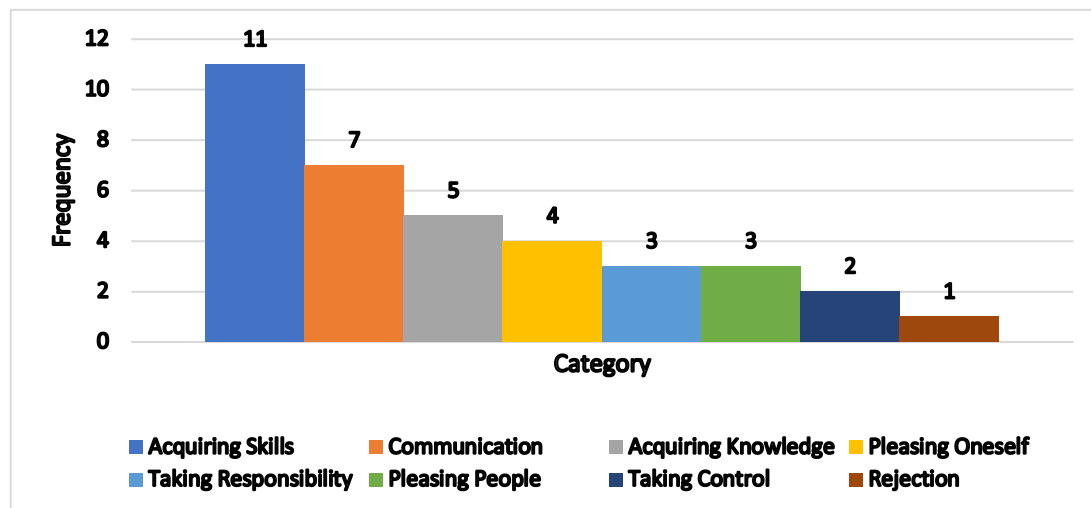


Figure 2: Frequency count of solution categories

The sections below provide a more detailed discussion of the problem and solution categories found in our data:

Problem Categories

Unreliable Partners

This problem category is found in only one article in *Her World*, which is, “Would You Snoop on Your Boyfriend’s Phone While He’s Asleep?”. In this article, this category appears in the two separate narrative examples of the characters mentioned in the articles, Joanna and Hannah,

where both discovered the betrayal of their boyfriends after keeping tabs on them. For example, Joanna discovered her boyfriend Ted's betrayal as he "had been keeping in touch with a former flame even though he denied it at first. He was also telling others he was "single", even though he'd been dating Joanna for close to a year."

The fact that "unreliable" husbands or boyfriends in the aforementioned article are often caught cheating through electronic gadgets and social media, is reflected by a number of articles in the Malaysian media that seemed to associate a link between the widespread availability of social media and the increasing rate of divorce among Malaysian couples including a much-publicized media interview by a leading psychologist in the country (*Equivocal* 2016). Another reason could be due to the fact that presenting this category within the social media frame can attract readers, many of whom are avid users of social media.

Risky Encounters

In Machin and van Leeuwen's (2003) definition, this problem category is described as: "encounters with new people, whether new colleagues at work, or men making advances, are always problematic, always fraught with risk. A wary attitude is called for" (502). However, in our analysis, this category can also include encounters with people who are not exactly new in a woman's life, but still pose problems for her. Moreover, unlike the previous problem category "Unreliable Partners", the problem category "Risky Encounters" in our study occurs when women *suspect* their partners of cheating without necessarily getting a confirmation of their guilt. As a result, these relationships can be "risky" and call for a wary attitude. In addition, men making advances and casual relationships, for example, are also included as "Risky Encounters" in our study since there is no commitment from the beginning, and hence, a woman needs to have a wary attitude to help her to minimize any risks the relationships or encounters may pose.

This problem category is found in two articles in *Her World* and in two articles in *Female*. These "Risky Encounters" with people appear in the form of "husbands", "boyfriends" and "casual daters" in *Her World*, while in *Female* they appear in the form of "a close male friend" and "casual partners." For example, in the article 'Juicy Read: "It's Just casual Sex..."' (F) the risky encounters appear as casual daters women may encounter. Women may feel risks in such relationships because they may have feelings that come after sexual relationships like attachment, jealousy, and awkwardness. That is, such relationships can be perceived as a risky one as women may struggle with their feelings as they continue with the relationship. For example, in this article, a girl called Kim says "When you're totally into a guy, emotions and feelings get in the way, resulting in you feeling used after the deed is done." This problem is not categorized under the problem category "Unreliable Partners" since there is no serious relationship from the beginning between the men and women involved as both only seek satisfaction for their sexual desires. But the encounter with casual partners can be fraught with different types of risks, including emotional ones, as shown in this example.

It is also found that "Risky Encounters" in the previous example appear as casual daters despite the fact that promiscuity is frowned upon in Malaysian society and the government sometimes censors publications over sexual content. The reason why this article was allowed to be published could be due to the fact that this issue is discussed in an advice article rather than other types of articles and it also appears as a problematic issue, which requires specific solutions in order for the

problem to be solved. Most importantly, the writers use non-Muslim names (“*Pamela*” and “*Kim*”) for the two girls that were named in the article. Thus, it appears that despite the fact that Malaysia is a generally conservative society, ‘racy’ and overtly sexual issues can still be allowed to be published but certain considerations have to be met as explained above.

Sexual Dissatisfaction

This problem of not achieving sexual satisfaction is found in two articles in *Her World*, and in two articles in *Female*. For example, in the article “5 Naughty Games to Sizzle Things Up in Bed” women may be seen as being dissatisfied with their sex life because ‘*sexy time lost its steam*’, and hence, they need to ‘*spice things up in bed*’. It should be noted that this problem is only implied from euphemistic phrases, such as “*Sizzle Things Up in Bed*”, “*spice up*”, and “*Bring the Spark Back*” as overtly explicit discussions about sexuality are generally not found in the Malaysian media due to government censorship over explicit sexual content.

Institutionalized Bias

This is a new problem category found in our data. We define it as the bias or double standards imposed on women by society due to its socio-cultural beliefs towards gender roles in general. This new problem category is quite similar to Machin and van Leeuwen’s (2003) “Institutional Obstacles” problem category which is described as: “...women face many institutional obstacles in a male-dominated world. They may have difficulty in gaining access to certain places or activities... Although this is in principle an issue of social and cultural gender inequality, it is usually formulated as a personal problem, and the social and political issues behind it are rarely dealt with explicitly” (502). However, based on our findings, we feel that a new category is needed to describe the problems found in our analysis, as the emphasis of this new category is on the biased perceptions faced by women by society rather than on *actual* obstacles they face. That is, the obstacles they face are perceived rather than real as in being denied access to an organization due to their gender.

This problem category appears in two articles in *Female*. For example, in “Can a Woman and Man JUST Be Close Friends?”, this problem category is linked to society’s judgments or *people second-guessing* the close friendships between men and women as they predict unreciprocated sexual or romantic attraction for one of them, “a friendzone case.” For instance, “The community judging you negatively; implying there must be something going on between us...”—*Oma*”. It is observed that in this article the problem is directed towards women only and the views obtained in the article are from women only unlike in some articles where there are quotes from men too, pertaining to an issue related to both men and women. This suggests that society’s judgment with regard to this issue is mainly reserved for women due to the gender inequality that exists in the society. Although Malaysia consistently attains a higher rank compared to other Muslim majority countries in the annual World Economic Forum’s (WEF) Gender Gap Index Report in terms of educational attainment, economic participation, health and political empowerment, Abdullah (2004) states that the majority of Malaysian women are still subjected to “a range of controls over the way they behave, talk or choose to lead their lives” (88).

Lack of Skills

This new problem category, which we found, is defined as women who are depicted as lacking some skills which are mainly related to their relationships with men. They need to acquire these

skills in order to develop or maintain their relationships with men. This problem category differs from other problem categories of Machin and van Leeuwen (2003) since in this category women are seen as inexperienced with men, sex, and relationships, and hence, the purpose of these articles is to help them explore new ways or alternatives of doing things beyond the routine which can open a new world of possibilities for them. With regard to lacking sex skills, this new category “Lack of Skills” does not mean that women are sexually dissatisfied with their relationships as in the category “Sexual Dissatisfaction”, but it means they may lack new sexual techniques that can further enhance their sexual satisfaction. The problem category “Lack of Skills” also differs from Machin and van Leeuwen’s problem category “Lack of Confidence”, since the former describes the problem(s) stemming from a woman’s lack of skills in some areas of life. This lack of skills may result or be a cause of lack of confidence, but these two categories are different as the problem category “Lack of Skills” is not always linked to “women’s own insecurity and lack of confidence.” This new category appears to be more positive than “Lack of Confidence” as it suggests that problems stemming from lack of social, personal, or sexual skills can be overcome quite easily by acquiring those skills. Thus, we consider this as a new problem category as it is inherently different from the other problem categories in Machin and van Leeuwen’s (2003) discourse schema.

It is found that women are perceived as lacking some skills which are mainly related to their relationship with men. They need to acquire these skills in order to develop or maintain their relationships with men. This problem category appears in four articles in *Her World*, while it appears in three articles in *Female*. Thus, this category appears to be the most prominent problem category for Malaysian women magazines as it is found in seven out of a total of 20 articles from the two magazines. This finding is not very surprising if we consider the traditional motivation of women’s magazines in general. Gill (2009) asserts that women’s magazines can be viewed as both “vehicles of pleasure” and as “purveyors of oppressive ideology” as women are constantly bombarded with messages of self-improvement (348). They are constantly reminded that they lack skills that are hampering them from living their ‘best lives ever’.

Lack of Knowledge

In this new problem category, women are told that they may lack knowledge or information about social matters which mainly relates to men’s thoughts. This problem category deals with abstract facts that are not known to women unlike the “Lack of Skills” category which relates to mainly practical skills, as shown in our examples in the previous section above. This category is found in two articles in *Her World* and in two articles in *Female*. For example, in the article “4 Things You Never Knew About Men and Sex” (HW) women are told that they may lack knowledge about men’s thoughts regarding sex, as expressed by the phrase ‘*You Never Knew*’ in the headline.

Solution Categories

In the world of *Female*, four solution categories of Machin and van Leeuwen (2003) are found, which are, “Acquiring Skills”, “Communication”, “Pleasing People” and “Taking Control”. Meanwhile in *Her World*, all the five solution categories of Machin and van Leeuwen (2003) are found. In both magazines, we also found three new solution categories, namely, “Acquiring Knowledge”, “Pleasing Oneself” and “Taking Responsibility”. These solution categories are discussed in detail in the sub-sections below:

Acquiring Skills

From the perspective of the Malaysian magazines, women are highly advised to learn new skills, either sexual, personal, or social skills. This category appears to be the most prominent solution category for these magazines since it is found in six articles in *Her World* and in five articles in *Female*. This solution category is mainly proposed for the problem category “Lack of Skills”. However, it is also a proposed solution for other categories such as “Sexual Dissatisfaction”, and “Lack of Knowledge”. These skills can be sexual skills, as featured in the article “10 Things You Must Try for Mind-Blowing Sex” (HW), for instance, or they can be personal and social ones, as featured in the article “How to Impress Anyone in 60 Seconds” (F). In the latter article, women are provided with skills that help them to strike up a conversation and to impress a new boss or a new client or a new male colleague.

Rejection

In Machin and van Leeuwen’s (2003) findings, this solution category is proposed when “people form a potential risk and should not be trusted too easily” (504). According to them, this solution occurs often in the Asian versions of *Cosmopolitan* that they studied. However, our study finds that this solution category occurs only in one article in the Malaysian data, hence, our finding contradicts Machin and van Leeuwen’s findings. This could be due to the fact that they studied the Asian versions of international magazines, unlike our study which investigates home-grown magazines.

Communication

From the perspective of the Malaysian women’s magazines, women may solve their problems with men, mainly sex problems, through communication. This category appears in four articles in *Her World* as a solution for the problem categories “Lack of Skills”, “Risky Encounters” and “Sexual Dissatisfaction”. It also appears in three articles in *Female* as a solution for the problem categories “Lack of Knowledge”, “Institutionalized Bias” and “Sexual Dissatisfaction”.

For example, in the article “5 Tricks to Spice Up Your Sex Life” (HW) this solution category is presented in the following phrases “Address emotional needs,” “Maintain open communication,” “Talk openly about your sex lives,” and “work collaboratively on how frequently you would like to have sex.” These phrases clearly demonstrate the importance of communication for women to develop their sexual life and to address their sexual needs.

Taking Control

This solution category is found as a subordinate category only in two articles in *Her World* and *Female* respectively. In both articles, they are offered as a subordinate solution to the main category of ‘Acquiring Skills’ or ‘Acquiring Knowledge’ in relation to sexual matters as in “10 Things You Must Try for Mind-Blowing Sex” or “5 Unexpected Things That Can Turn A Man On In Bed”. This solution category is demonstrated by verb phrases ‘Take control’, ‘Initiate sex’, and ‘Go on Top’, thus advising women to be in control of how they have sex.

Pleasing People

Women are advised to bring pleasures to people, mainly men, and to make them happy by paying attention to their feelings. This solution category is found in three articles in our data. For example, in the article, “10 Secrets to a Successful Marriage” (HW), it appears as a subordinate solution category for the problem category ‘Lack of Skills’. This solution category is clearly demonstrated by the following imperatives in the text: “Don’t ask your man to work on the house when you know he’s tied up with a deadline at the office or had a rough week at work”, and “Bite your tongue sometimes: Do not criticise your man for the work he has done.” It appears then that women’s magazines in Malaysia advise women to be compliant to their partners and value their partners’ pleasure over their own despite also advising women to be in control of their lives, especially sexual lives, as in the previous solution category. Thus, there appear to be some discrepancies in some of the advice given in these publications. The contradictory nature of women’s magazines has also been identified previously by scholars such as Winship (1987) who argues that women’s magazines often perform ‘ideological juggling acts’ in which contradictory advice is given in different parts of the magazine.

Acquiring Knowledge

In this solution category, women must access new information and be up-to-date with new streams of knowledge which are mainly related to sex and relationship with men. This new category differs from Machin and van Leeuwen’s (2003) category “Acquiring Skills” since the latter presents practical tips or instructions women should do, unlike this new category which presents solutions in the form of information women should know. This solution category is found in two articles in *Her World* and in three articles in *Female*. It is mainly proposed for the problem category “Lack of Knowledge”. However, it is also a proposed solution for the problem category “Sexual Dissatisfaction”. For example, the article “4 Things You Never Knew About Men and Sex” (HW) provides four facts on what women never knew about men and sex, for example, “Most men masturbate even if they are happily married.”

Pleasing Oneself

This solution category we found appears to be the opposite of Machin and van Leeuwen’s ‘Pleasing People’, as in this new category, women are advised to make themselves a priority through pleasing themselves and paying attention to their own feelings instead of others in order to have a better quality of life. This solution category appears in two articles in *Her World* and in two articles in *Female*.

For example, in the article “5 Tricks to Spice Up Your Sex Life” (HW) this solution category is clearly demonstrated in the following tip: “Explore other ways: You don’t need to have intercourse to enjoy sexual pleasure. There are plenty of other ways to have fun such as manual sex, mutual masturbation, or even using sex toys.” In this example, the woman has an active role in making herself happy through seeking other ways or alternatives for her sexual pleasure, as expressed by the verb “explore.”

Taking Responsibility

In this solution category, which we have found, women are responsible for finding appropriate solutions to problems they might face in life. That is, women are encouraged to make their own decisions, which are perceived to be part of the solution. This solution category differs from Machin and van Leeuwen's solution category "Taking Control" as their category only relates to solving sexual problems, while this new category includes other problems women may face in their social life. In this solution category, women are seen as being responsible for finding appropriate solutions to problems they may face in life.

This solution category appears in one article in *Her World* and in two articles in *Female*. For example, in the article 'Juicy Read: "It's Just casual Sex..."' (F), the solution for whether casual relationship necessarily end up in heartache for women is implicated from the two separate narratives of two girls, "*Kim*" and "*Pamela*", where both present their opinions based on their personal experiences. The opinions of the two girls reflect the pros and cons of casual relationships. For example, Kim states that one of the advantages of casual sex is that "one doesn't have to deal with the problems that couples do in serious relationships."

On the other hand, the disadvantage of such a relationship is that "one might miss little things like having someone to come home to or someone to hold hands with." Kim is aware that she must be personally responsible for the feelings that come after casual sex, as she "train[ed], desensiti[zed] and programme[d] herself to block off the feelings that come after sexual relations." In this article, the writer presents the opinions of the two girls while leaving the solution for the reader to decide on her own. This form of solution is seen as encouraging women to become more independent and confident through making their own choices and may be preferred by the writer as it reflects how the act of advice-giving may have evolved in contemporary women's magazines. However, in the aforementioned example, it is worth noting that writers may sometimes use this solution in a generally conservative society in order to avoid dealing with sensitivities that may arise when discussing topics such as casual sex. Hence, by presenting two possible solutions for the reader to make her own conclusion, potential conflicts or backlash are avoided.

CONCLUSION

Our study showed that all of the problem categories, with the exception of two categories, of Machin and van Leeuwen are found in the advice articles of the Malaysian women magazine that we analyzed. The two problem categories that are not present in our data are "Lack of Confidence" and 'Institutional Obstacles'. We also found new problem and solution categories that were not present in the original study, as discussed earlier. This suggests that Machin and van Leeuwen's (2003) claim that their problem-solution discourse schema found in women's magazines across cultures is "a global socio-cognitive schema for interpreting the problems and vicissitudes that can arise in women's lives" (508), may not necessarily be always true as far as locally-produced women's magazines are concerned. This was our original hypothesis and our findings confirm this fact to a certain extent.

However, despite the existence of different problems and solutions in these home-grown English language women's magazines compared to the ones found by the afore-mentioned researchers,

there are some parallels that cannot be ignored. Similar to the various editions of *Cosmopolitan* magazine studied by Machin and van Leeuwen, the main message of the advice articles of these Malaysian magazines appears to be the empowerment of women in all aspects of life including sexual freedom and choice. As none of the articles come from the readers themselves, these are the messages that the producers of these publications would like to impart to Malaysian women who read their articles. The problems and solutions that are constructed by these magazines reflect contemporary, globalized issues that denote modernity and progressive values. Yet, there appears to be a keen awareness of potential backlash when addressing issues such as sexual freedom by the writers. As demonstrated in our findings, the writers often carefully navigate these minefields through strategies such as using non-Muslim names and not committing to a stance when writing about particularly controversial topics such as casual sex. Thus, the choice of topics that are highlighted in these articles reflects global contemporary issues, but they are often ‘tempered’ for local consumption.

On a final note, we believe that future research should consider investigating women’s magazines from the different languages found in Malaysia. In addition, a cross-cultural and cross-language examination of Malaysian women’s magazines would generate interesting and useful insights into the Malaysian media landscape in general and Malaysian women’s magazines in particular.

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