

Female Subjectivity through Body Dressing and Positioning in Malaysian Advertisements

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Abstract

Most feminist studies on the topics of dress and the female body have been carried out within the context, as well as from the perspective, of the West. Malaysia as a multi-ethnic country that is at the same time open and exposed to the effects of globalisation offers an interesting case study on the representations of diverse women's image-making and their implications on gendered subjectivity and selfhood. Body dressing and positioning are among the powerful means of representation that construct the subject in a way that furthers the self-advantaging ends of the advertiser. Dress and body-related texts are excerpted from Malaysian print advertisements in selected English dailies for close semiological and discourse analysis in the context of the dominant twin ideologies of patriarchy and Islam. Drawing on a broad feminist theory, the analysis reveals two diametrically opposite overarching themes of oppression and empowerment. Discussion related to these themes addresses the Malaysian context of cultural norms of fashion discourses and the underpinning economic motivation.

Keywords

Female subjectivity, dress, body positioning, Malaysian advertisements, power, globalisation

Most feminist studies on the topic of dress and the female body have been carried out within the context, as well as from the perspective, of the Euro-American West. As Featherstone points out, Western cultures tend to see the body as a neutral site for fashion, with identity seen in terms of a dichotomous "I" and a racialised other. The danger is that "they operate with fixed stereotypes which fetishize other cultures and give no room for agency and cultural mixing" (Featherstone 5). Globalisation (in addition to the long history of British colonialism) has meant that Malaysia, like many other countries, has been exposed to predominantly Western influences. This is clearly evident in

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media discourses. Examining Malaysian advertising, this paper explores representations of diverse women's image-making and their implications for gendered subjectivity and selfhood as the social impact of advertising lies not just in its representation but also construction of identity. In particular, focus is given to dress and positioning as among the powerful means of representation that construct the subject in a way that furthers the self-advantaging ends of the advertiser. This is carried out with the awareness of two dominant ideologies of patriarchy and Islam, which have conventionally been viewed as oppressing women. Malaysia is, in fact, a country of paradoxes in that, as a Muslim-dominant nation it imposes strict policing over Muslim women's dressing and behaviour. At the same time, other non-Muslim ethnic groups are purportedly free of such religious regulations. How then do clothes serve to mark and manage identity? How does positioning comment on the role of clothes in signifying identity? Considering that advertisements selectively represent the world, what sorts of social identities, what versions of self and what cultural values do they project? As Goddard tells us, though advertisements are ephemeral and shortlived, cumulatively they "form a body of messages about the culture that produced them" (3).

By studying dress and positioning in Malaysian advertisements for their signifying properties, this paper investigates identity constructions in relation to empowerment and disempowerment. Malaysian women have the opportunity to pursue careers and hold important decision making positions in both the private and public sectors. Many are highly educated with tertiary qualifications and enjoy the liberty to voice their opinions in public and private arenas. At the other extreme, there is still a large number who are oppressed and abused, and their legal rights are compromised in matters of property inheritance in certain sections of Malaysia's still largely patriarchal society. As advertisements are enactments of power relations in a society, a study of sartorial representations will give an indication of the positioning of women in the relationship between gender and the shifts of power in the thriving Malaysian economy of the past few decades. What do these advertisements express of Malaysian women's improved social status and feminist self-awareness that challenges traditional gender stereotyping of women as the inferior other? Or, do advertisements continue to stereotype women, positioning them in traditional and suppressed roles, as highlighted in Tan, Lee and Phua's (2002) study? A random selection of dress and body related advertisements are excerpted from the most frequently read Malaysian newspapers *The Star*, *New Straits Times* and *The Sun* mainly between 2009 and 2011 for close semiological and discourse analysis. The underlying assumption here is that newspapers, with their more generalised audience, offer a perspective that is close to the general societal and cultural normative expectations and perceptions of gendered subjectivity. Drawing on a

broad feminist theory, the analysis reveals two diametrically opposite overarching themes of oppression and empowerment.

Feminism, Dress and Body

Much of existing feminist research on the representations of women in advertising has been carried out in the United States of America and Europe: for example, Bordo 1993, Douglas 1994, Gauntlett 2008, Gill 2008, Goffman 1976 and Thornham 2007. As expected, then, the literatures reflect assumptions about women that are specific to Western cultures with the dominant themes of women as stereotyped, passive and disempowered sexual objects, and adverse effects on their self-esteem. More specifically, the study of dress and fashion only gained serious scholarly attention in the last three decades, and there is still a need to relate how dress reveals the “body in culture” (Entwistle and Wilson 4). Eicher and Sumberg view fashion as “a process involving change,” adding that “awareness of change within one’s lifetime is a requisite aspect of fashion” (299). As such, fashion is not central to my study, but because it encompasses dress it will have a tangential relevance. Dress, on the other hand, is defined as “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (Eicher and Sumberg 298) whereas clothing is understood as apparel; these two terms are subsumed under “dressing” for my purpose here.

Clothes are an essential accessory to feminine beauty, and become a mark of gender identity. More significantly, clothes are the “surface politics of the body” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 173) as they are an integral representation of a socially pre-scripted performed identity. Gender is not a fixed identity, as Butler maintained:

... gender identity is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 179)

Repetitive stylisation of the body is markedly present in advertising; on the one hand, the body is dressed and positioned in ways that produce a homogenised image of femininity while, on the other hand, it reflects the way gender identity is performed.

Research on women’s identity in relation to fashion has generally recognised the conflicting themes of the wearer’s agency as passive or active (see Guy and Banim, “Personal Collections” 313, Barnard 1996, Craik 1994 and Wilson 1987). Dress practices for women may mark a form of oppression, but can also function as a sartorial strategy to gain agency and empowerment. Dress is a material and embodied practice, a “second skin” so to speak, and how it is

worn in the way the body is positioned adds to its signifying function that is itself interlinked with political, social and economic concerns. To draw on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, dress decorum can be seen as an apparatus of discipline and surveillance that contributes centrally to subject formation, clearly signalled in work uniforms such as those worn by car service technicians, flight attendants, or power suits for executives, which function to mark social boundaries through occupational identity. Not as overt but no less political is women's clothing as a visible signifier, which inscribes a feminine or feminist identity that invites complicity with or interrogation of social practices of sartorial embodiment. Although logically there is no necessary correlation between the external clothed body and internal sexual consciousness or sense of self, advertising discourse frequently ascribes internal desires to external appearance. Looking at dress as a sign in advertisements throws into relief an ideal body management that is perpetuated through a systematic exercise of hegemonic power to maintain privileges for the socio-culturally dominant group. However, as Bourdieu points out, the amount of investment put into appearance or "self-presentation" is proportionate to the "chances of material or symbolic profit" that can be expected (202). In this way, dress practices are paradoxically restrictive (or "stitched up") and empowering (expressed as "gaping seams") especially for the marginalised in patriarchal societies.²

Female Dressing in Malaysian Advertisements

According to Mona Domosh, advertisements have often "associated consumption with the highest 'stage' of the civilizational hierarchy" (see Lim, "Fashioning Identities" 60). The United States of America (US) is a dominant player in this and at the heart of many US advertisements is the notion of success that is aligned with the American Dream,³ attainable from partaking in American culture through consumption of material commodities. Domosh asserts that gendered ideologies are implicated in contemporary economic imperialism and globalisation. Malaysia, like the rest of the world, comes under this spell of "civilising imperative" which finds its expression in, among many others, the consumption of fashion.⁴ In addition, the Euro-American fashion

² The terms "stitched up" and "gaping seams" are commonly found in feminist research on fashion (see Guy and Banim, "Personal Collections").

³ James Truslow Adams coined the term "American Dream" in 1931 to refer to the self-empowerment of every man and woman "to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable" (Adams, *The Epic of America* 404). The national mythology of the American Dream emphasises values that go beyond mere material success. It is the latter, however, that is emphasised in US advertisements.

⁴ This is despite what Maila Stevens in *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia* pointed out as "'westoxification,' which sees all things western as toxic" (2), resulting from an anti-West ideology promoted officially under the premiership of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

that has become the normative way of dressing in general may also be seen as a legacy of British colonialism in Malaysia. This is evident in the sample of advertisements collected despite the varieties of cultural clothing that exist in the diverse ethnic communities.⁵ The twin notions of oppression and empowerment, then, take on the colouration not only in the context of local, but also the global, predominantly Western, cultures. The latter inculcates needs and desires to be a highly cultivated individual through possession and consumption of fashionable items such as luxury designer clothes and mass-produced designer apparel, which serve the economic interests of the West. This is a form of economic imperialism which continues the historical domination of a colonial force through an “invisible” control and dependency in previously colonised countries like Malaysia. In modern Malaysian materialist consumer society, Western influence is a constitutive force that shapes body, identity and subject formation in inculcating fantasies of success and power through the wearing of designer labels, most of which are from the West. Layered over this is the patriarchal ideology that is not only inherent in Western representations of gender, but also strongly present in local cultures and practices.

In actual everyday life, the Western norm of dressing does not extend to most women from the Malay ethnic group, especially from non-urban spaces and localities, where it is more usual for them to don the traditional *baju kurong* as a daily practice. Also considered as the national dress, this somatic contrast with other ethnic groups is a representation through dress as a signifying practice for a constructed Malaysian identity that finds a parallel in the usual discursive comparison of “Malay” and “non-Malay.” Obviously, this sort of social and political division will not serve advertisers whose dominant concern is economic, which explains the relative lack of cultural dressing in general as advertisements aim to reach the widest possible audience.⁶ Rather, there is a homogenising tendency in the dress identities after the image of the West. Nonetheless, the Euro-American dressing of models is (supposedly) governed by the Malaysian Code of Advertising Practice which is underpinned by Islamic rulings for decency and modesty in clothing. Two principles of particular relevance are:

⁵ A Visit Malaysia 2014 tourism site proclaims: “From magnificent head-feathers with bark body-covers to antique gold-woven royal songket fabric, the array of Malaysia's traditional costumes and textiles are stunningly diverse and colourful.” It also states “Today, traditional attire such as the Malay *baju kebaya*, Indian *saree* and Chinese *cheongsam* are still widely worn.”

⁶ In contrast to the infrequent representation of local cultural dress in English dailies, traditional clothing figures prominently to reflect the habitual dress practices of the targeted audience of Malay newspapers and magazines.

1. Advertisements should not contain statements or visual presentations offensive to the standards of decency prevailing among those who are likely to be exposed to them. (1.1 of II General Principles; this calls for decent dressing for female models.)
2. Advertisements should not contain anything which might lead or lend support to acts of violence or anti-social behaviour, nor should they appear to condone such acts. (3.3 of II General Principles; this means that sexual or suggestive elements are forbidden.)

While advertisers are careful to avoid any outrageous contravening of the above codes, they take advantage of the vagueness of the wording to show models in body-hugging and even “modest” chest revealing clothes to inscribe an idealised, embodied femininity. If we compare this to the representation of national identity on the female body in the form of a signature Malay batik *sarong kebaya* (which is truly a second skin that wraps round and reveals the curves of the body) worn by a flight attendant of the national carrier, Malaysia Airlines, a similar message is projected of the dress as a signifier of (Asian) femininity and sexuality. It is telling that a male scholar, Keith Lovegrove, compares the plane’s aisle to “a stewardess’s catwalk,” catering to a male clientele (Lim 31). Interestingly, the budget airline AirAsia which offers serious competition to the national airline has its air-stewardesses apparelled in white shirts with red jackets coupled with above-knee red skirts. Its slogan “Now everyone can fly” is reinforced by an image that is energetic and modern, and that aligns with the more normative manner of smart dressing to portray to its middle- or lower middle-income target audience the possibility of upward social mobility or, as PuruShotam (137) terms it, “middle-class betterment,” as signalled by the ability to fly. Where the advertisements carry images of serving in-flight passengers, the role is almost always portrayed by female flight attendants although male attendants are also employed by the two airlines. The female figure, then, continues to be stereotyped through dressing and subservience. Also worth noting is that fitting clothes are on bodies that are slim and attractive for female models in general, which generate anxieties that subject bodies to dietary regimes and self-surveillance, and thus add to a system of signifiers that is associated with the social processes regulating appearance and female subjectivity.

Apart from advertisements put up by Malaysia Airlines, ethnic dress appears when advertisements relate to themes of tradition such as found in those associated with cultural events and festivities (for example, major ethnic New Year celebrations and the Mid-Autumn festival). Another type of advertisement which shows a frequency in its use of traditional dressing is from the Tourism Board in its series of Visit Malaysia advertisements. Elizabeth

Wilson may be right in suggesting that when women wear traditional dress, “they symbolize what is authentic, true to their own culture, in opposition to the cultural colonization of imperialism” (*Adorned in Dreams* 14). But in addition and perhaps more significantly, given the context in which ethnic dressing appears, such styles are romanticisations to promote sales or goodwill with the targeted audience. Predictably, the female seems by default to be the preferred embodiment.

Positioning, Subject Construction and Power

In all textual representations, positioning is integral to the way our perception and sense-making are constructed; hence, female dressing goes hand in hand with body positioning. Positioning is allied to location, in a literal and figurative sense, in a manner that suggests notions of “self,” “identity” and “subjectivity.” Positioning has a two-way orientation: (a) in the way models are physically angled or situated in relation to one another in space and time; and (b) in the way social locations are defined for the reading/viewing subject vis-à-vis the story told in the context of the ad. These orientations indicate that subjectivity may be inscribed or constructed in the process of interaction. More specifically, positioning can be viewed in the passive as “being positioned” or more actively with a sense of the agentive in the subject (i.e. the reader) positioning itself. In the first instance, social, historical and biological factors determine the subject (described as “a world-to-subject direction of fit” by Bamberg [10]), whereas in the second case (“a subject-to-world direction of fit”), the subject actively engages in constructing itself and its world by acting as its own agent in positioning itself. Much of the time, positioning takes place somewhere in between, with some construction by the discourse and some self-determination. In the advertisements examined, a repeated feature is a tendency for female models to frame male models. A representative example is the “Builder of Distinction, Setia” advertisement from S P Setia Berhad (*The Star* 9 July 2011; see Appendix 1) which has a group of eight participants, six males and two females, all wearing dark formal executive suits. The two females are positioned one on either side, with one perched on the arm of a chair and the other a little behind to the left side of one of the two male executives seated in front. All the other four male figures are centred behind these two males in front. The arrangement falls into what Kress and van Leeuwen describe as a picture of “Symbolic Attribute” (105): “Human participants in Symbolic Attributive processes usually pose for the viewer, rather than being shown as involved in some action.... they just sit or stand there, for no reason other than to display themselves to the viewer” (Kress and van Leeuwen 105). What is important about this form of representation is that meaning and identity are conferred (106); thus, the dark suits are attributes that confer authority and power. Spatial use and positioning are also attributes that interpret the relations of power

between the genders in this advertisement with the females at the margins. While the females are displayed as belonging to the powerful group who are “The Best” in the company, their body and physical positioning compromises a strong portrayal of power (which, in contrast, is unproblematically represented for the men). The gender display in this and similar texts (of women in power suits but pushed to the margins or placed lower or behind men) exemplifies what Goffman calls “the ritualization of subordination” (40) in the hierarchicised representations of the subjects.

Positioning may be signalled by linguistic address and gaze with the latter two often complementing each other. In advertising, the pronoun that abounds in indexing the subject is the second person “you.” A reason for this can be found in the nature of displaced communication in print ads, which results in impersonality created by the lack of a face-to-face interaction with the reader. Ads producers get round this problem by linguistically (and visually) positioning the reader to create an illusion of intimacy. As Cook says, “Ads are... intrusive. Their ‘you’ is part of a high-involvement strategy which attempts to win us over by very direct address; they step uninvited into our world, expressing interest in our most intimate concerns” (161). The producer addresses a mass audience but speaks as though he knows the reader intimately. This “compensatory tendency” is what Fairclough in *Language and Power* calls “synthetic personalization” (52). Through it, the ideal subject is constructed, with whom the actual reader is invited to identify. In other words, the textual subject should be viewed as a disjunction from the referential subject. A model in an advertisement is representative rather than particular so that the reader can, if she so wishes, read herself into the subject’s position. The intermediary between such a textual construction and the actual reader is what Fairclough calls “an ideal subject”:

... since all discourse producers must produce with *some* interpreter in mind, what media producers do is address an *ideal subject*, be it viewer, or listener, or reader. Media discourse has built into it a subject position for an ideal subject, and actual viewers or listeners or readers have to negotiate a relationship with the ideal subject. (Fairclough 41)

The second way advertisements signal positioning to create the ideal subject is through the gaze. The linguistic second person direct address is paralleled by the model’s direct gaze at the reader, or what Kress and van Leeuwen call a “demand”: “the participant’s gaze (and the gestures, if present) demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her” (118). In addition, power is more effectively represented with the direct gaze as seen in the S P Setia advertisement discussed above. In contrast, an “offer” gaze does not make direct contact with the

viewer, so that “the viewer’s role is that of an invisible onlooker... it [the image] ‘offers’ the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case” (119). The Sogo advertisement in Appendix 2 illustrates this perfectly. The objectification and “display” effects are enhanced with the model’s dressing that resembles the Christmas tree placed just behind her. The direct gaze and offer gaze are both present in Malaysian advertising to either invite or challenge identification between the one who gazes and the one gazed at, or to pretend unawareness in being the object of gaze.

The “offer” gaze corroborates with feminist claims that the ideal subject is also a gendered position that is predominantly male, a view first seriously posited by Mulvey in her famous article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” about the “male gaze” where a female subject’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” is specifically for the pleasure of the male viewing subject. According to Mills, even where “there is an attempt to position the reader as female, the address is destined for a male as voyeur” (Mills 67). This view essentially points to women as sexually objectified, and has been critiqued with an assertion for “the possible homoerotic pleasures for the female spectator” (Stacey 27), which is supported by women dressing to become “the woman I want to be” as an enjoyable activity that creates emotional and cultural capital (Guy and Banim 320). Tseelon and Kaiser further add that the male gaze may be re-appropriated when women evaluate their appearance to challenge their sexual positioning.

The demand gaze, on the other hand, is more open to a reading of compliance or resistance, depending on the actual reader who is, of course, not a totally passive subject. There are essentially two ways she can negotiate a relationship with the ideal subject: one is to accept the way a text addresses her, and the other is to resist through a more critical reading from consciousness-raising. Passive acceptance often happens in unself-aware and uncritical reading that allows the text to seduce her into naturalising the constructed textual self, and thus encouraging her to merge her own self with the projected image in the advertisement. In this way, the reader is positioned imaginarily as or with the subject in the text. This is one reason why advertisers make use of good-looking and well-groomed models to endorse products as “attempts to contact or lay claim to another identity” (Sontag qtd. in Stanley 48). Alternatively, readers can see the model’s dressing as a process of negotiation and opportunity, where investment in appearance becomes an investment in its exchange-value.

Conclusion

The Malaysian advertisements examined reveal that the dominant choice of clothing is Euro-American rather than ethnic (which is only represented selectively in special themed advertisements) as they are underpinned by economic motivation for the advertisers. Whether inspired by local culture or

by the West, body dressing is relatively modest as it is governed by the principles of advertising in Malaysia. The projection of women's dressing and social position is still conservative or "safe" with hardly any images that can be considered empowering or individualistic but, more significantly, with an assimilation or internalisation of a Western sartorial culture that is replicated with the latter's economic imperatives. In so far as advertisements are a reflection of the gendered self, the Malaysian face and race (even if pluralised) is no longer the "racialised Other" but, instead, takes centre-stage as the Self. However, cultural diversity is undistinctive in the tendency to present the clothed female body as homogenised after the Western fashion. Analysis of dressing complemented by a consideration of positioning shows the Malaysian female to be still subject to feminist concerns with oppression while messages of empowerment, though somewhat present, are understated. Advertising plays an important part in purveying stereotypes or, conversely, in helping to construct a more empowered self. There is thus a need for a closer reflection of and more positive portrayal of the changing economic status of Malaysian women so that, as a cultural artefact, advertising will not only serve to index the country's gender situation and development but also practice fairer and non-discriminatory representations of women.

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Appendix 1



Appendix 2

