THE EFFECTS OF GENDER ADVERTISING ON BRAND IMAGE: THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

It is said that gender advertising has caused construction of gender ideals in our society. It forms what are the acceptable and non acceptable temperaments, abilities, skills, activities and behaviors of both genders. Gender advertising has also helped form a tool in advertising, namely gender targeting. This research focuses on the relevance use of gender advertising in advertisements, likeability of the use of gender advertising and perception created through gender advertising in relation to the brand image as viewed by the Malaysian consumer. The research is to identify both the positive and negative effects caused by the various means of gender advertising. The use of gender advertising can either make or break a brand image. The recognition of these effects will in turn contribute to positive usage of gender advertising that does not go beyond the purpose of selling brands to consumer. The method employed is the in-depth interview aided with visual representations to 30 respondents of both genders selectively chosen with criteria either they have involved with the product categories chosen or has had prior brand relationships. In conclusion, the results indicated that gender advertising, if used inappropriately will tarnish brand image and will cause brand to be taken lightly as Malaysian consumer today seek concrete information and representation of the brands.

Keywords: gender advertising; brand-conscious; brand image; gender; repetitive exposure

KESAN PENGIKLANAN GENDER TERHADAP IMEJ JENAMA: KAJIAN BERDASARKAN KONTEKS MALAYSIA

Abstrak

Sering diperkatakan bahawa pengiklanan gender telah menghasilkan pembinaan ideal gender dalam masyarakat kita. Ia telah membina perasaan, kemampuan, kemahiran dan tingkah laku yang diterima atau ditolak terhadap kedua-dua gender. Pengiklanan gender juga turut membantu membina suatu alat pengiklanan, iaitu sasaran gender. Penyelidikan ini berfokus kepada kerelevanan penggunaan gender dalam pengiklanan, penerimaan atau kesukaan terhadap penggunaan pengiklanan gender dan persepsi yang dibina melalui pengiklanan gender yang berkaitan dengan imej jenama seperti yang dilihat oleh pengguna Malaysia. Penyelidikan ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti kedua-dua kesan positif dan negatif yang dihasilkan oleh kepelbagaian kaedah pengiklanan gender. Penggunaan pengiklanan gender boleh membangunkan atau merosakkan imej jenama. Pengenalpastian kesan-kesan ini akan menyumbang kepada penggunaan positif pengiklanan gender yang tidak berlebihan hingga merosakkan tujuan penjualan jenama kepada pengguna. Kaedah kajian yang digunakan ialah temubual mendalam berbantukan representasi visual (iklan cetak) terhadap 30 responden dari kedua-dua gender yang dipilih secara selektif berasaskan kriteria sama ada mereka terlibat dengan kategori barangan yang dipilih untuk kajian atau mempunyai hubungan pengalaman terdahulu dengan jenama-jenama tersebut. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa pengiklanan gender, seandainya tidak digunakan dengan baik, akan merosakkan imej jenama dan membolehkan jenama tidak dipedulikan oleh pengguna Malaysia hari ini kerana mereka mencari maklumat yang konkrit dan representasi jenama-jenama tersebut.

Kata kunci: *pengiklanan gender; kesedaran jenama; imej jenama; gender; pengulangan pendedahan*

Introduction

History and the *Oxford English Dictionary* tell us that the word 'brand' goes back to the medieval period in England. To brand means to burn with a hot iron whether for making or for cauterizing. By 1587 it was already being used in a modern sense; which is to make indelibly, as a proof of ownership and a sign of quality. By 1602 it was being used in a way which implies a bit of cognitive

psychology which is to impress indelibly on one's memory. Branding took off as an activity when manufacturing got into full swing in the 19th century. It was a simple way to indicate origin and promise quality.

Branding has emerged as a top management priority in the last decade due to the growing realization that brands are one of the most valuable intangible assets that firms have but goes into the minds of consumers is not necessarily the same as the brand characteristics the marketers use to build the brand identity. An important and relatively unique aspect of branding is the focus on brand intangibles; aspects of the brand image that do not involve physical, tangible, or concrete attributes or benefits (Levy, 1999). Brand intangibles are a common means by which marketers differentiate their brands with consumers (Park, Jaworski & MacInnis, 1986) and transcend physical products (Kotler & Keller, 2006). Intangibles cover a wide range of different types of brand associations, such as actual or aspiration user imagery; purchase and consumption imagery, and history, heritage and experiences (Keller, 2001).

The perception of consumers towards a certain brand can cover a variety of measures, including attitude towards a brand (Monga & John, 2007; Shen & Chen, 2007); attitude towards an advertisement or communication of the brand (Shen & Chen, 2006; Lee & Labroo, 2004); perceived quality of the brand (Keller & Lehmann,2006; Essoussi & Merunka, 2007); memorability (Volckner & Sattler, 2007); brand value or equity (Buchanan et. al. 1999); brand image (Lee & Labroo, 2004; Essoussi & Merunka, 2007); brand personality (Aaker, 1997); purchase intentions (Lee & Labroo, 2004) and choice (Shiv et. al., 1997).

Brand image is the first word or image that comes to mind when a certain brand is mentioned. It is fragile and can be altered by new information or damaged by media commentators (O'Shaughnessy, 2003). Brand image is the representation of the brand in the mind of the consumer. In western cultures, brand image can be like a human being with unique characteristics. In collectivistic culture like Malaysia, it can be quality and the representation of trust in a firm. Consumers will attribute to the brand characteristics that fit their own mental maps and from there develop a brand image (De Mooij, 2005).

Advertising is defined as a paid for mass media communication, and a means of managing and controlling the consumer markets at the least cost (Brierley, 1995). It is clear that advertisers seem quite willing to manipulate fantasies and exploit our gender identities to sell products. Whereas gender is a social construct, a dichotomy that exists in all societies (Costa, 1994). According to the Online Dictionary of the Social Sciences (2009), the differences between male and female have been socially constructed, but also at the symbolic level, to cultural ideals and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, and, at the structural level, to the division of labor in institutions and organizations.

Temperament, abilities and skills, activities and behaviors, ideal types, and accepted and unacceptable deviations from the ideal, sensuality and cultural based essence of what it means to be male or female, are all part of the gender

constructs of a given society.

Research problem

This research is inspired by Scott A. Lukas (2003) study on the topics of gender advertising and has founded the Gender Ads Project on the World Wide Web. Lukas has studied the different elements of gender advertising such as stereotyping, objectification of male and female, violence against male and female, nymphomania and reductionism of female in advertising. The project has intrigued the researchers to further study gender advertising and how it is capable of making and breaking a brand image, in the Malaysian context.

Dyer (1982) noted that analysis of advertisements suggest that gender is routinely portrayed according to traditional culture stereotypes; women are shown as very feminine, as "sex objects", as housewives, mothers, homemakers; and men in situation of authority and dominance over women. Gender advertising exerts pressure on both sexes. Traditionally, for men, the emphasis is outward, on professional achievement and enjoyment of a certain type of lifestyle more than personal appearance. Women are encouraged to look inward, critiquing the appearance of their bodies and faces.

While some elements used in gender advertising are being frown upon, others have a different view altogether. Some men or women consider the portrayal of gender in advertisements part of their fantasy and believe that using a product advertise in such a way would fulfill their fantasy. Advertising is a fantasy, a created world, and people often recognize the fantastic elements in advertising and incorporate it into their own interpretation of what life should be like. What is common to commercial scenes and rare in life may yet be commonly part of the ideals and fantasies of many actual people (Goffman, 1979). Advertising works if people are willing to buy into participating, if only briefly, in a fantasy world filled with beautiful people and things. Consumers were convinced to see their lives as a reflection of those they knew from the advertisements.

The main problem that has been observed from the subject area is unnecessary, exaggerated portrayal of male and female in different staged situations that do not contribute positively to the building of a brand but evokes negative connotation. The labels female and male carry powerful associations and the interpretation may vary between marketers, consumers and genders. Marketers may intend to put a positive image into the minds of consumers but it does not usually bring about desired result.

Malaysian consumers are lead through a decent and modest society, being mould of its social, political and economic living. Where advertising is concerned, guidelines are provided by The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code (2003), as part of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998. Prominently, Article 3.1 (iii) stated that the portrayal of women, men or children as mere sexual objects or to demean them in such manner is prohibited. As for Article 7.1 on women in advertising, (a) advertisements must not project women

as an object for sex or be shown to merely satisfy men's desire and satisfaction, and (b) advertisements must portray positive images of women. Though the guidelines might be clear, it is important to seek the viewpoints of the Malaysian consumers themselves pertaining to gender advertising. This is the intention of the research.

The existence of misogyny, violence and dehumanization present in our consumer culture, our media and advertising specifically, it is important to acknowledge that consumers are reacting against it. It is even more important to prove that negative perceptions are building up in the minds of consumers. Consumers are increasingly savvy and therefore cynical toward pervasive advertising due to the constant bombarding by the media. Gender advertising has a lot of potential in helping a brand relating to its consumers and building an image in their minds. Due to changing trends, some argue that gender advertising should be utilized moderately without trying to oversell a certain brand or putting thoughts into the minds of consumers.

Thus, the goals of this research are to identify the effects of gender advertising has on brand image; be it a positive or negative, and, to distinguish if Malaysian consumers are open to the different types of gender advertising.

Research objective
The ultimate objective of this research is to identify both the positive and negative effects caused by the various means of gender advertising. The use of gender advertising can either make or break a brand image. The recognition of these effects will in turn contribute to positive usage of gender advertising that does not go beyond the purpose of selling products to customers. Thus, the research is to identify the effects of gender advertising on brand image.

Malaysia being a country which is considerably liberal in media consumption has yet to be exposed to all types of gender advertising. Understanding the Malaysian audience will help advertisers to determine the type of ads that will appeal to them without having to be condemned when a less-than-typical advertisement is being put out. Thus, the research is to distinguish if Malaysians are open to the many different types of gender advertising.

Many existing researches have highlighted the abuse of gender advertising, but only a few has consider its effects on brand image. This research hopes to verify these effects and contribute to the minimization of damage on brand image. This research also aims to verify if the Malaysian audience is ready to accept all types of gender advertising in their media. This will help advertisers create advertisements that will appeal to consumer and not cause an outbreak of condemnation against brands or advertisers.

Literature review
Erving Goffman's study of gender in advertisements in the 1970's is one of the most cited works on the subject. Through the study of individual poses, facial

expressions, and the interaction between models in advertisements, Goffman (1979) drew parallels between the reality of social interaction, and the 'hyper-ritualization' of advertising. In advertising, advertisers do not create the ritualized expressions they employ; they seem to draw upon the same corpus of displays, the same ritual idiom that is the resource of all of us who participate in social situations, and to the same end: the rendering of glimpsed action readable.

According to Goffman (1979), what happens in everyday situations of conversation and human behavior, is what makes advertising understandable. Through the concepts of relative size, feminine touch, functions ranking, depiction of the family, ritualization of subordination, and licensed withdrawal. Goffman (1979) explains how women and men are interacting in advertisements in ways expected and encouraged by society. After examining a selection of advertising illustrations from magazines, Goffman (1979) concluded that women are consistently subordinated to men in a variety of situations, relating to them not as equals but as children to parents.

Vigorito and Curry (1998) analyzed the portrayal of men in magazines and advertisements, and discovered a difference in the portrayal of men in men's magazines versus women's magazines. They found that the greater the percentage of male readers the more males are portrayed in occupational (hegemonic) roles and less males are portrayed in parent or spouse/partner (nurturing) roles. The problems with different roles for different audiences are the dissimilar expectations that could occur. Men are apparently more realistically portrayed in men's magazines, while women's magazines provide more of an ideal illustration of men. Since, presumably, many men are not reading women's magazines, men's gender roles as portrayed by magazine advertising and editorial content remain clear to men themselves.

Garst and Bodenhausen (1997) studied men's sex roles, specifically men's reactions to fake magazine advertisements. The men were split into groups of more traditional and less traditional gender role attitudes, and examined advertisements with models that were highly androgynous, mildly androgynous and traditionally masculine (the advertisements featured both young and older models). Garst and Bodenhausen (1997) were looking for shifts in subjects attitudes' after viewing the advertisements.

Those in the less traditional group were more susceptible to media influences than their more traditional counterparts. So, if we think advertising might have a positive influence on changing sex roles, this study casts doubts on the feasibility of creating dramatic changes in more traditional men's gender role attitudes through mass media channels because these men appear to reject images that do not fit their framework for appropriate male roles. If men are most comfortable with advertising that reflect the roles they portray in their own lives, men's leisure magazine advertising is more likely to reinforce the traditional, societally acceptable male gender role.

Richins (1991) studied female undergraduate students for their responses

to models in advertisements, and found that not only did the women regularly compared themselves to the models, but they were less satisfied with how they looked after seeing the advertisements with models in them. They rated themselves the same in terms of level of attractiveness, so the models' pictures did not have an effect on that scale. Instead, the effect was that the students had a lowered sense of satisfaction for their physical appearance. The point of advertising is to sell product, and yet interestingly, for the relative inexpensive products in the sample advertising, "either the products were ineffective in improving appearance to the extent desired, or subjects were not sufficiently convinced that the products would yield the desired benefits and did not try them." Because advertising presents a beauty ideal that is obviously unattainable, it seems that at least part of the audience viewing an advertisement will employ a realistic interpretation and not even try the product.

The theory of perception (Little, 1999) is applicable to this research because it proves how setting sight on imagery can create a perception and alters the thoughts and emotions. The triggering of thoughts and emotions will determine how consumers feel about communication of a brand and its product. This will later have an effect on consumers' purchase intentions and decisions (Kapferer, 1997) as to fulfill their needs and wants as applied to the Maslow's hierarchy of needs model.

Methodology
The method employed in this research is the focus group. A side-by-side comparison of advertisements was carried out using interviews and group discussions. This approach used two or more advertisements in a comparative sense to understanding differences in the constructions of gender in advertising. A goal of this form of analysis is to understand content and thematic differences in visual representations. This was followed by a structured interview via the focus groups, that encompassed respondents thoughts and emotions that were triggered by the advertisements. Questions are revolved around respondents' impression and take out of a brand after observing each advertisement. The researchers have developed enough of an understanding of the problem to have a clear agenda for the discussions with the respondents, but still remain open to having their understanding of the area of inquiry open to revision by respondents.

Care was taken to ensure that stimulus used and interview questions revolved around gender advertising alone and will not touch on other issues such as violence, homosexuality or children in advertising. These issues are closely related to gender advertising as genders are used to portray situations of violence and homosexuality. However, it is important that the focus remains strictly on gender advertising alone to ensure that truthful investigation is attained.

Sample
The sample consists of 30 respondents complying to the following characteristics;

age between 20 to 30, both male and female of equal numbers, young executives with reasonable income, resides around market centers specifically the Klang Valley, exposed to advertising in their daily routines and involved with the product categories or have had prior brand relationships. The respondents were divided into 6 focus groups, five persons to each group. The researchers will not claim that this sample is representatives of all brand consumers. However, the sample did reflect some of the main characteristics of brand consumers.

Data Collection
The respondents were divided into 6 focus groups and each discussion took one to two hours per session. The unstructured interviews contain guided open-ended questions which may develop in unanticipated directions. Discussions were tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. This allows the researchers to focus on interacting with the participants and follow the discussion.

Stimulus materials which were print advertisements were gathered from magazines and World Wide Web to aid the data collection. Two different advertisements were selected for each brand; a product-centered and one which portrays gender in a certain situation. Brands or product categories chosen were relevant to the respondents' lifestyle. The brand advertisements used in this research were Olympus, BMW, Motorola, McDonald's and Febreze. These advertisements were put side-by-side and the discussion will be carried out. Respondents' respond to the gender based advertisements was considered the data for the research.

Data Analysis
Data were analyzed via the verbatim remarks accordingly to three factors: relevance of the use of gender advertising in an advertisement, likeability of the use of gender advertising, and perception created through gender advertising.

Findings
This research has enabled the researcher to observe the effects of the different types of gender advertising towards brand image, as perceived by the respondents. The types of gender advertising as revealed in this study are male fantasies, women as naggers or difficult, social construction of female role in the society and objectification of male and female. The following findings were recorded:
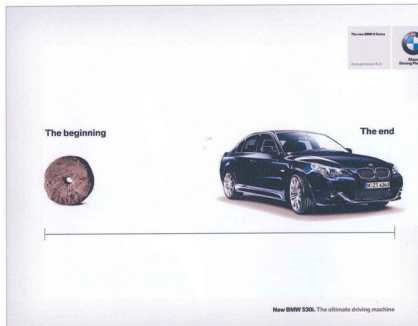
Brand: BMW

Image 1   **Image 2**
Source: XPO, Bogota, Colombia

In reference to the BMW advertisements, image 2 shows the man has replaced a woman; presumably his lover with the image of a car. In this situation, is the male's fantasy legitimate? The respondents trust that in this situation, the man's fantasy has compromised the dignity of the woman. The copy which says, "The Ultimate Attraction" is not able to justify which is the main attraction. Respondents suggest that the attraction could either be the man, the woman or the car in the advertisement. However, if the car was meant to be the main attraction, should it be given the most attention and occupies the most space in the advertisement?

The car manufacturer, BMW would have wasted a lot of money investing on this advertisement considering its car was not even the main attraction. One has to consider the intention of the target audience when they stop and look at a car advertisement. There is a possibility that the target audience is interested in a BMW product, but looking at this advertisement could repel him/her because he/she is not able to acquire any information about BMW. This could lead a potential customer away to pursue a different brand, maybe even the brand of a competitor.

Several respondents cannot deny the entertainment value this advertisement contains. It will definitely cause magazine flippers to stop and take a good look. An amazing feat, but is not enough to construct a positive brand image. Automobile brands need to built a healthy, reliable brand image in order to lure customer to invest on their product. A clear message along with a dignified execution might be able to pull it off and benefits a brand more in a long run. Image 1 of the BMW advertisement seems to appeal more to the respondents.

Brand: Motorola

Image 3
Source: Mediabanc Asia

Image 4
Source: Coloribus

In image 3 of the Motorola advertisement, the man is seen using a phone which resembles a razor due to the physical feature of the phone. The man is dressed smartly, looks independent and in a position to offend and a position of authority. When asked during the discussion, several respondents said that the advertisement conveys a hint of violence. Female respondents show no interest in the brand as it portrayed to be masculine. Male respondents, however would like to see themselves in the position of the man; successful, assured, stylish and secure.

As comparison, image 4 of the Motorola advertisement placed a woman in the position of authority. To amplify her control even more, men were portrayed as her subordinates and she had manipulated them. The men were objectified, being rearranged like blocks of wood. The men were also placed in a lower position. The female respondents agreed that this advertisement has made the product less masculine. The male respondents, on the other hand, feel being warded off by this advertisement. The finding can conclude that the placement of a gender in the position of authority in an advertisement can cause a brand to appear more masculine or feminine and this will determine the audience it will attract, thus contributing to the brand image.

Brand: Olympus

| **Image 5** | **Image 6** |
| *Source: BBDO, Malaysia* | *Source: Diamond Ogilvy, Seoul, Korea* |

Image 5 of the Olympus brand advertisement shows a woman alone, independent of any control. She seems assured, and in control of the brand. Most respondents agreed the use of a woman in this advertisement has helped enhance the brand features even more. Compared to a man's finger, a woman's finger is much slimmer and the camera is being compared against the finger of a woman. The use of gender in this advertisement has brought upon positive impact on the brand image as it is seen as clever and decorous.

Image 6, on the other hand, is manipulating a gender to sell either the product or the brand. This advertisement has reduced women to their bodies only, and they have no value except for what is corporal. The use of a woman's body as a point of focus in any advertisement is degrading not just to the product but also to a brand. This is even more apparent in this advertisement, as it is attempting to promote a highly advanced camera. This category of camera is used mainly by professionals or those who desires high quality photography; tasteful consumers. Most respondents agreed that manipulating a woman's body shows the little respect the brand has for women and belittling the target audience.
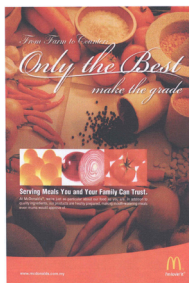
Brand: McDonald's

| **Image 7** | **Image 8** |
| *Source: Mediabanc Asia* | *Source: DDB South Africa* |

Comparing to image 7, image 8 of McDonald's advertisement puts up a positive example of how gender should be used in advertising. As to most respondents, although it might not attract as much attention, at least it was attracting the right kind of attention. A mother is shown bringing her child for a day out at a pet shop. It is a bonding activity for both mother and child and thus creating a healthy relationship. This is exactly what the brand inspires to do as a brand image. Most respondents agreed the appropriate use of gender in this advertisement had helped to construct and substantiate a positive brand image.

Brand: Febreze

Image 9
Source: Coloribus

Image 10
Source: Grey Buenos Aires, Argentina

Image 9 of the Febreze advertisement is rather a straight forward showing the beneficial attribute of the brand. In image 10, the mother is seen to be scolding a child. Very often in advertisements, the woman is also seen as the less rational one, having neglected the fact that there was a pet in the house. She is also seen to be acting on her emotions as she did not take the time to analyze what was wrong. However, most respondents revealed that this has not deterred them from wanting to the buy the brand, or to continue to trust the brand. In fact, it has provoked respondents' curiosity to want to try the brand and experience the effectiveness themselves.

Discussion and conclusion
The study has leads the researchers to believe that the use of gender in advertising will have both positive and negative impact on brand image. The effects depend heavily on how the genders are portrayed. Gender should be portrayed in apt situations that are relevant to the brand. Brands should display respect for the talent, its target audience and the gender community as a whole.

The use of gender in advertising should not be abused to attack minds of consumers. Instead brands should use it to enhance the quality of brands, to give brand a personality or to target an audience group. In appropriate use of gender, advertising may help a brand to attain attention for a short period of time while

people talk about it. Investing in proper use of gender advertising will help build a reputable brand image for a long run.

Although it cannot conclude that gender advertising brings positive or negative effects on brand image, the study has been able to identify the types of gender advertising that can bring about a positive result. The key to achieving positive outcome when using gender advertising is to have respect to individuals be it the talents, the target audiences and the current consumers.

The findings show that problem arises in gender advertising no longer linger around construction of social roles and unattainable model-like figure. Issue that arises from gender advertising is ever-changing. The researchers strongly recommend for continuous research to be done in identifying these issues. Although solutions may not come out of the researches, advertisers should know to refrain from causing issues to arise.

In Malaysia, guidelines are quite clearly given in self regulated codes of advertising practice pertaining of gender use in advertising. Malaysia being a conservative nation has its own interpretation of decency, therefore, it is subjected to the consumer to interpret and evaluate decency of advertisements. Perhaps, the younger generation who are more exposed and liberal in their media consumption will be able to tolerate the various kinds of gender advertising and appreciated its entertainment value compared to the older generation. Due to the presence of the most sensitive group of audience, advertisers will have to be mindful of public sensitivities before using potentially offensive and distasteful material, to ensure against negative results from their use as not to bring advertising into disrepute (Malaysian Code of Advertising Practice, 2006).

It is probably wise for Malaysians to be kept away from extreme gender advertising for the time being as there is still a group of audience which are especially sensitive towards gender issues. Gender advertising should be used moderately and appropriately in order not to offend any particular group of audience.

In conclusion, the study has helped the researchers to understand the magnitude of gender advertising. It may seem that the study has covered all nature of gender advertising more are emerging everyday as advertisers come up with new strategies to lure consumers. It is evident that gender advertising can make and break a brand. On a larger scale, gender advertising has the impact on the society. Repetitive exposure to improper gender advertisements will cause stereotyping, continues construction of social roles, discrimination and abuse. The study would like to caution advertisers to be responsible for what they put in the media and the well being of the society. The study also urges the general public to rationalize what they consume of the media.

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