

Fat Stigmatisation in Slimming Advertisements in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Much is known about the Western female body. In a non-Western context, such as Malaysia, it remains relatively unexplored. This paper explores the representation of the female body in the Malaysian context. For this purpose, a corpus of slimming advertisements was collected over an eighteen-month period (July 2007 – December 2008) from *The Star*, one of Malaysia's leading English language daily newspapers. It examines both visual and textual material in selected slimming advertisements portraying the fat female body as unhealthy, ugly and repulsive. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) visual social semiotics framework, the analysis demonstrates how producers of text position themselves as the authorial voice and engage their readers by several means, especially threats and warnings. The findings show some of the fat-phobic strategies used in the slimming advertisements and how they work to 'scare' women into the relentless pursuit of body slimming. At the same time, it shows how overweight women are marginalised and discriminated against. The slimming advertisements, in this light, can be seen as one of the carriers of a dominant ideology of feminine beauty. It defines what forms of feminine beauty are acceptable and desirable. Experiences that contradict with prevailing values of those given are either excluded or denied, thus reinforcing existing limited meanings of feminine beauty.

Keywords: Body, fat, female, slimming advertisement, visual social semiotics

1. INTRODUCTION

Slimming advertisements featuring beautiful slim-looking models play a crucial role in affecting public perception of women and reinforcing the association of a slim female body with attractiveness, social acceptance, happiness (Stice and Shaw, 1994). They offer products and/or services for losing weight and persuading women to conform to the promoted 'ideal' form by engaging in weight change behaviours (Albani, 2005; Ng, 2005; Lee and Fung, 2006; Tan, 2010). The constant reminder that 'thin is beautiful' plays on women's fear of being overweight and is built on their insecurities about their bodies. When advertisements make room for the fat body, they stigmatise fatness among women and exemplify what it is that women should fear, the social stigma of being fat (Bordo, 1993). The images of fat bodies as undesirable and ungainly and thin bodies as desirable and beautiful make women

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become more conscious of their own appearance and aware that ‘looking good’ “not only becomes necessary to achieve social acceptability, but can become the key to a more exciting lifestyle” (Featherstone, 1991:185).

With this in mind, the paper examines the way selected slimming advertisements visually represent the fat female bodies as ‘fundamentally flawed’ bringing into focus the imperfections that have to be managed and brought under control. Comments on the language will be made to show how both image and text work together to create a more powerful message, i.e. problematising fatness in women. We will use the framework from Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) to analyse the visuals in the selected slimming advertisements. From the analyses conducted, we will make an attempt to show what strategies are used to highlight the imperfections of the female body.

By studying overt and subtle visual messages about women and their bodies, we may be able to discover the way they are involved in creating and perpetuating ideologies about how women should look, what they should strive towards and what they should do to achieve the feminine ideal (see Sheldon, 1997). It is argued that visual images do not only help to communicate the norm but help regulate behaviour of those different from it (see Lacovetta, 2006).

Background to Study

The pressure for women to achieve the ideal body size and shape may arise from comparisons of their own figure with the ideal figure as portrayed in the slimming advertisements. The slimming advertisements are constantly promoting slimness as the ideal female beauty and this possibly leads to an unhealthy body image among women. It is not surprising that slimming advertising in the mass media is the “strongest predictor” of eating disorder symptoms (Caqueo-Urizar *et al.*, 2010: 78).

Bartky (1997: 80) argues that normative femininity seems to be centred more on the women’s body, “its presumed heterosexuality and appearance”, bound by stereotypes that depict fat women negatively. Like their western counterparts, women in Malaysia are also expected to be beautiful. The current beauty norm, slim and toned body, creates the fear of being fat, which is regarded as a primary fear (Millman, 1980), and consequently the realisation that the body must be disciplined and controlled, not allowing it to “grow, to become large and ‘unfeminine’” (Hartley, 2010: 248). Concerns for weight arise from the desirability of being thin and the negative perception of fatness among women. As a result, women are critical of their body and body dissatisfaction has contributed significantly to eating disorders, low self-esteem and even depression (Caqueo-Urizar *et al.*, 2010; Swami *et al.*, 2010; Grogan, 2007; Scriven, 2007; Luevorasirikul, 2007; Orbach, 2006; O’pry, 2003; Moody-Hall, 2001; Myer and Biocca, 1992). According to Freedman (1986: 150) “analysis of media images confirms that a very thin body-type predominates and that positive social attributes are related to thinness, whereas negative ones are related to fatness. Women are told that they can only be loved when they are svelte.”

Some studies in Malaysia have reported that the strong desire to be beautiful and the fear of fat have resulted in growing problems related to body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) among adolescent girls in Malaysia (Swami and Tovée, 2005). BDD reinforces the desire to

be thin, since thinness is what contemporary society regards as 'beautiful'. A significant proportion of Malaysian adolescent girls were dissatisfied with their body weight and this has affected their poor body image. Pon *et al.* (2004) assessed body image perception and eating behaviour among fifty overweight or obese (OW) and fifty normal weight (NW) girls in Teluk Intan, Perak. From the comparison of both groups, Pon *et al.* (2004: 142) reported that, "...normal weight girls were twice likely to have incorrect perception of their body weight as compared to their OW counterparts. [...]. Dissatisfaction with body weight leads to chronic dieting and eventually to full-blown eating disorders."

The other study on body image perception by Khor *et al.* (2009) was conducted among a total of 2,050 adolescents (1,043 males and 1,007 females) in 185 secondary schools in Kedah and Penang. The findings were that

"[f]emales had a significantly higher mean body dissatisfaction score than males, indicating their preference for a slimmer body shape. More males (49.1%) preferred a larger body size while more females (58.3%) idealised a smaller body. Compared to normal weight and underweight subjects, overweight males and females expressed lower confidence and acceptance levels, as well as expressed greater preoccupation with and anxiety over their body weight and shape."

In another recent news report, Hera Lukman (2010) discloses how adolescent girls in Malaysia are influenced by this dissatisfaction with body image:

"A Malaysian study involving 13- to 16-year-old adolescents showed that more than 65% of girls want to be thinner, and about 10% of them are at risk for developing eating disorders. More than 75% of boys prefer to be bigger and more muscular. Of these, 15% to 28% are engaged in activities such as consuming protein supplements and lifting weights."

The general Malaysian adult population does not differ much from the studies conducted among the adolescents. In 2009, the global information and media firm, The Nielsen Company (<http://my.acnielsen.com/news/20090122.shtml>), revealed that

"[c]lose to half (46%) of the 500 Malaysians interviewed think they are overweight and 58 % are on a mission to lose weight. The local scenario mirrors the global appetite for dieting and exercising to improve health with 50% of the 28,000 people surveyed in 52 countries saying that they are tipping the scales and want to start shedding the pounds."

From these studies and reports, it is apparent that we are facing a growing problem in Malaysian society. Examining this predicament locally provides a point of reference to the much talked about 'Western' literature on female body image. In the past, the perception of body fat differed between East and West. Swami and Tovée (2005:124) bring out an important point with regard to this perception in most traditional and non-Western socio-cultural settings:

Body fat is believed to be an indicator of wealth and prosperity (McGarvey, 1991), with obesity as a symbol of economic success, femininity, and sexual capacity (Ghannam, 1997; Nasser, 1988; Rudovsky, 1974).

With reference to this information, body fat is used to be seen positively in non-Western settings. However, Swami and Tovée (2005:117) also highlight that “Kuala Lumpur [...] has witnessed a noticeable rise in clinical eating disorders”. Therefore, it could be argued that in Malaysia, where rapid industrialisation and urbanisation are taking place, Malaysian women are subjected to the “pursuit of thinness and a fear of fatness” (Swami and Tovée, 2005:125). This is a subtle but distinctive change within a non-Western setting that substantiates the need for further research.

In fact, Swami and Tovée (2005:125) discovered that “[a]long with increasing affluence, there has also been an increase in the prevalence of obesity in Malaysia (Ismail *et al.*, 2002) that legitimises the pursuit of thinness and a fear of fatness”. Swami and Tovée (*ibid*) go on to hypothesise that

“...the rapid modernisation that has occurred in Malaysia fosters risk factors for slim bodily ideals and disordered eating, it can be predicted that fat-concern, dieting and ultimately eating disorders will become increasingly common experiences for Malaysian women.”

With this hypothesis in mind, it is not surprising that when the fat body appears in the slimming advertisement, it represents all that that must be avoided. As Brown (1985: 65) reminds us, “[f]at women are ugly, bad and not valuable because they are in violation of so many of the rules.” In so doing, the slimming advertisements influence and dictate the perception of feminine beauty where thin bodies become ideal, beautiful and desirable whereas fat bodies are rejected and considered ugly. ‘Thin’ becomes the norm for beauty whereas ‘fat’ is abhorred and considered deviant.

2. METHODOLOGY

A corpus of slimming advertisements was collected over an eighteen month period (July 2007 – December 2008)¹ from *The Star*, one of Malaysia’s leading English language daily newspapers. We chose *The Star* as our research site because it has the highest readership and circulation in Malaysia.² Of these only three advertisements containing the images of overweight bodies were selected for analysis. In general, slimming advertisements adopt a number of strategies to persuade women to lose weight and conform to the ‘ideal’ body image. Slimming centres use various means to market their services and products including technologically advanced fat burning methods, herbal methods, celebrities and medical experts to endorse their brands, images of clients’ before and after transformation and reality shows.

The images are analysed using the framework derived from Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) theory of grammar of visual design focusing on the three functions of representation,

¹ A corpus of over 100 print advertisements was taken from *The Star* daily English newspaper as part of the first author’s Ph.D research data during the period from July 2007 to December 2008.

² According to Nielsen Media Research Q4 2009 (Jan 2009 – Dec 2009), *The Star* daily English newspaper has the highest readership and circulation in the country (Table 1) (continued next page)

interactive and compositional. Each of these is further subdivided into several categories as outlined in Figure 1 (see Appendix A). The framework offers a detailed, structured and systematic means of describing the images. Five main structures of the images are explored and illustrated in relation to the selected slimming advertisements: forms of representation, composition, interactive meaning, setting, and appearance of the represented participants. The framework will enable us to examine empirically “what is in” the image. Jewitt (1999: 65) reminds us that this meaning should be seen as an embedded and integral part of our socio-cultural environment.

There are two kinds of representational processes: narrative and conceptual. *Narrative processes* present the world in terms of “doing” and “happening”, of the unfolding of actions, events, or processes of change (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996:73; Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, p.141). *Conceptual processes* do not represent the world as “doing” but “as being something, or meaning something, or belonging to some category, or having certain characteristics or components” (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, p.141). The decision to represent something in a narrative or conceptual process is contingent to understanding the discourses which mediate their representation (Jewitt, 1999: 268; Jewitt and Oyama, 2001:141). For instance, when a slimming advertisement portrays a slim, shapely and taut female body as attractive, feminine, and the ideal, this woman is depicted in terms of conceptual processes rather than narrative processes. It goes to mean that the focus on the ‘essences’ of being a woman lies in having a perfectly sculpted body. The setting, props and represented appearance (posture, facial expressions, gestures, attire, hair and shoes) are also taken into consideration if they contribute to the meaning making. These resources are considered as

Table for footnote 2: Readership/Circulation of *The Star* and *Sunday Star*

Readership			
Star	Other newspapers		
The Star (daily)	926,000	New Straits Times	236,000
Sunday Star	887,000	New Sunday Times	218,000
		The Sun (daily)	152,000
* Source: Nielsen Media Research Q4 2009 (Jan 2009 - Dec 2009)			
Circulation			
Star	Other newspapers		
The Star (daily)	295,479	New Straits Times	120,770
Sunday Star	304,357	New Sunday Times	141,986
		The Sun	287,935
		The Edge	23,369
* Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations, Malaysia - 1 July 2008 - 30 June 2009			

some of the non-verbal communication (NVC for short).³ By means of NVC, meaning can be further understood.⁴

The *interactive* plane records the relationship between the represented and the viewer. This is done through encoding of viewer-represented point of view (angle, eye-level), contact (demand, offer) and distance classified under close, medium or long shot (emphasis, authors’).

On the *compositional* dimension, attention is given to the salience and framing of elements; whether elements are new or given, vertically or horizontally polarised, marginal or central to the overall composition of the image. In this way, the descriptions of the images are used to systematically explore and generate embedded assumptions of female body image.

³ Non-verbal communication (NVC) is an acronym used by Nalon (1997: 87 - 88); following Argle (1975) and Ruesch and Kees (1972), Nalon argues that NVC is “primarily related to emotional states, attitudes to other people and information about the self”. Some of the main resources are face, gestures, posture and appearance. They are “interpersonal in nature” and are mainly “addressee-oriented”. Nalon highlights the importance of taking NVC into consideration:

“This activity of predicting possible consequences and inferring emotional states is important in advertising, for it is precisely on the creation of expectation and identification that most of it is based.”

⁴ Some of the NVC that are crucial to observe in this study are: face (especially eye and mouth), gestures, posture and overall appearance. Nalon (1997: 88) tells us that, “[t]he face is the single most important area for signalling emotions”. She goes on to explain how the colours of the skin can reflect psychological states: red for being flustered or angry, white for being fearful, and rosy for being shy or of robust health. The parting of one’s lips can convey different intentions too, for instance: a smile “has a strong interpersonal appeal” or potentially dissolves conflict; it may, depending on the degree of openness, expresses aggressiveness or sexual overtone. Nalon emphasises the eyes as the most important aspect in making a wide range of meanings. It also depends on the “degree of openness, the dimension of the pupil, the kind of make-up”. She (ibid) adds,

“...[m]ore specifically, patterns of gaze plays an important role in establishing relations between people: a direct gaze is used in the *initiation of interaction* and plays a central role in the development of attachments and sociability; depending on the context of situation, it may also be interpreted as a signal for *liking* and *intimacy* (especially if it is prolonged), with pupil size acting as a signal for interpersonal attraction. But gaze is also affected by power relations, so that in general a dominant person tends to use direct gaze less but s/he can break gaze last.”

As for gestures, they are formed by the limbs or body, for example, hand and/or arm positions/movements may take on quite specific meanings (shrugging shoulders as negation/indifferent/disinterest or clenched fist for tensed feeling) and they can be culturally specific. Nalon (ibid) postulates that although “most gestures do not have ‘fixed’ meanings; it is rather their combination with other factors which produces certain kinds of meanings, with a multiplying effect.”

In terms of posture, “standing, sitting/squatting/kneeling and lying” are three fundamental poses for human being (Nalon, 1997: 89). The different positions/openness of the limbs and/or different angles of the body are further elements that help to indicate one’s attitude. Another common strategy involves exposing part(s) of the body. Overall appearance also involves clothing. By certain dress code, it may suggest varied appeals: professional (doctor’s coat/full business suit), sexually available (revealing dresses), athletic (sports attire) and so forth. By the combination of these different NV cues, for example: direct alluring gaze, partial or total skin exposure, seductive posture and parted lips – they constitute a strong sexual overtone as realised visually by means of NVC (Nalon, 1997: 89-90).

3. ANALYSIS

Fat or obese people are rarely featured in slimming advertisements unless it is to show the fat-to-slim transformation or before- and after-photo shots. But these slimming centres, Bizzy Body, Marie France Bodyline and Unisense used obese/overweight women as their models (see Appendix B for Advertisements 1-3).

Advertisement 1: "Bye bye FAT! Hello to a new you!"

Advertisement 1 is clearly influenced by the contemporary fad with reality shows. The slimming programme is designed as part of a weight lost campaign by Bizzy Body: The Slimming Expert. The publication details include a full page appearance in *The Star* on 11 November 2008.

Representational Meaning: The model is photographed in full, with her back to the viewer. This shot carries symbolic significance conceptually. The faceless frightfully obese woman is represented as an icon of obesity. Her morbid obesity signals the desperation to be rid of her body fat in order to conform to what is deemed beautiful and attractive in contemporary society. Even the taglines, "Bye bye FAT! Hello to a new you!" support this inference. She is visually represented as passive, weak and powerless. She is seated on the floor, with the left hand supporting her fat body and both legs slightly bent to the right side forming some kind of balance. A range of props can confer symbolic meanings on the fat woman. Where skimpy clothing usually is meant to flaunt one's slim and nicely shaped figure, her spaghetti top and her tight fitting slit skirt are rather a means of mockery in view of her fatness. This ill-fitting attire further emphasises the folds around the arms, back, waist, bottoms and legs. Her hair is tied up in a bun, which allows the viewer to have clear view of her folded neck.

Interactive Meaning: This is a long shot of a morbidly obese woman. In other slimming advertisements, a long shot is usually meant to showcase the silhouette of the ideal slim body. In this case, although the nameless woman's whole body is fully visible, it is not meant to flaunt her curves. Rather, she is faceless, photographed with her back towards the viewer and seated on the floor. This sitting position accentuates her body fat. The hidden face is a form of detachment from any interaction. It also indicates a sense of shame of being fat. She comes across as a specimen on display, offering herself like an object on display. The only interaction that comes across from this representation of the fat figure is to instill the fear of fat.

Compositional Meaning: What the advertisement is promoting is a "totally transformed and filled with confidence" person. To promote this, it is important to make a strategic arrangement of the three key elements of a composition, that is, information value, framing and salience. The compositional structure serves to enhance the meaning produced through the image and text. Advertisement 1 shows an image of a grotesquely obese woman on the bottom left (1/4 of the page). The visual embodies the *left-right* information value where the left-right placement creates a "*given-new*" structure. The *given* is the fat body whereas the *right* is the bodycopy which promotes the "biggest weight lost campaign". There is no distinct frameline; in fact, its absence connects the messages in different modes, the images and the bodycopy. This helps to consolidate both textual and visual messages. The different font sizes of the written information increases saliency. It makes some elements

more eye-catching than others: for example, the words, “Get Ready for the biggest Weight Lost Campaign!” are in bold, enlarged font and strategically placed on the top of the bodycopy. To add more attractive deals to the textual message, the advertisement lists out the “exciting activities” available during the event date. The two different modes are used to realise different communicative functions, the obese woman visual is to convey the dire need to get rid of fat and the write-up gives further details of the weight lost campaign.

Advertisement 2: “When your clothes get too tight, it’s time to lose the flab”

Advertisement 2 (published on 3 March, 2008) has three images, a woman’s midriff and two long shots showing the slimming transformation of a nameless lady. Fat to slim transformation or also commonly known as, before- and after-photo shot is one of the most popular strategies used to market slimming products or services. The before- and after-shots of the same person provide evidence that it is possible to lose weight and become slim through professional slimming services or products. Many slimming centres use this strategy to attract potential clients because they are easily convinced by the transformation shown in the photographs.

Representational Meaning: The sagging midriff is the most salient visual and conceptually, it is a symbolic representation of how the ‘hideous’ fat makes it difficult for one to fit into one’s jeans. The message of “can’t fit into your jeans” ultimately points to one’s overall appearance. The two images depict the slimming transformation. Before shedding her weight, she appears to be grotesquely fleshy. After her slimming success, she wears a broad smile on her face. The after-shot is represented in the form of a woman who has successfully shed off the extra pounds/inches. Her representation symbolically defines her as a satisfied and confident woman. Symbolic attributes of femininity, satisfaction and confidence are made salient in the representation, for example, by the two different poses, attires and facial expressions.

Interactive Meaning: The first image is captured in a medium close shot. It shows a flabby midriff of a woman who is trying to buckle up her pants. This is clearly an *offer* form of information. The information offered is that when you are fat, you will have difficulty to buckle up your pants. With this kind of *offer* contact, the headless and legless represented comes across as a specimen on display, to be looked at. The bulging midriff is not offered to be admired, rather to be repulsed. On the other hand, the two long shots of a nameless woman display her before- and after-slimming transformation. They are shots that demonstrate the possibility of slimming down with the help of the slimming centre. The same woman interacts differently with her viewer. After her success of becoming slim, she looks satisfied and confident.

Compositional Meaning: The various elements of a visual text can be distributed along two main axes: the horizontal (left/right) and the vertical (top/bottom). Vertically, the space for the advertisement is divided into two rows, the top row taking up about 40% of the space, and the bottom takes up the remaining 60%. The latter is divided into two (borderless) columns: the left column containing the before and after images of the nameless lady whereas on the right column, it is the bodycopy. The interplay of centre/margin, top/bottom and left-to-right guides a reading path from the most salient element, to the next most salient and so on. The image of the woman’s bulging midriff is made salient through

size. It takes up almost half the top of the page. Size and tonal contrasts make these elements even more eye-catching.

Advertisement 3: "Is this the way you trim your HIPS to stay hip?"

Advertisement 3 (published 7 April, 2008) contains a woman gazing at her own reflection in a full-length mirror. This strategy is not commonly used in slimming advertisements. Here the advertiser emphasises the importance of one's physical appearance, her hips size. The mirror gazing is symbolically significant; it signifies women looking at themselves. More interestingly, following Berger's "prescient statement", Orbach (2009:108) claims that:

"Women watch themselves being looked at has been transmuted into women assuming the gaze of the observer, looking at themselves from the outside and finding that they continually fail to meet the expectations our pervasive and persuasive visual culture demands."

Indeed, according to the representational metafunction, the person looking into the mirror sees his/her own reflection. She (the Reactor) observes herself as reflected in the mirror (the Phenomenon) (T. van Leeuwen, personal communication, August 15, 2011).

The advertisement has very few words which are placed on the right: "Is this the way you trim your HIPS to stay hip? There's a sensible way to trim your hip. It's UNISENSE!". The left column contains a creative play of a lady looking at her own reflection in a mirror. It is a full length mirror but the lady's whole body reflection is divided into two (top and bottom) with the middle or the lady's hips being concealed. Obviously, the advert is highlighting the fact that before the therapy the lady has oversized hips, measuring 110cm purposely hidden in the mirror reflection. The final one-third of the advertisement page comprises three details: on the left, the promotion; on the right, the unnamed lady who has successfully shed weight on the hips; and at the bottom band, the straight information about Unisense.

Representational Meaning: A person gazing at herself in the mirror is a transactional reaction process in which the woman is both reactor and phenomenon (the mirror reflection looking back). She (the Reactor) observes herself (the Phenomenon). The anonymity of the unknown lady works in two ways: firstly, the unnamed lady can represent just about anyone who has wide hips; and secondly, her anonymity works to engage those who have a similar 'problem'. The fact that she is not a renowned celebrity makes it easier for others with the problem of wide hips to identify themselves with her. The mirror is divided into two portions, the top half showing her body and the lower half her legs. The middle portion of the mirror, where her 110cm hips should be, is not shown. This 'trimming' of the mirror reflection clearly conveys the message that wide hips are not acceptable. The hips need 'trimming' as the copy says, "There's a sensible way to trim your hip." Only her reflection in the mirror, which is a projection of what she can look like with trimmed hips will bring the smile to her face (as shown by the Phenomenon). The smile is affirmative. It suggests that she would be a happier person if her hips were smaller. The bottom right corner contains a full length image of the same lady. She stands with her face turned towards the viewers with a smile on her face. And next to her hips, are the words "Hips after therapy: 89 cm".

Interactive Meaning: With her back against the viewer and the self-reflection in the mirror, the lady does not in any way interact with the viewer. She offers herself as a specimen to be looked at, with a deliberate focus on her wide hips. The same person appears with trimmed hips at the bottom right corner, looking directly at the viewer, hence establishing contact. At this particular point, with the smile on her face, she is conveying the message of being a satisfied and successful client of Unisense. Her direct gaze and beaming smile are suggestive that, 'if she can do it, so can you!'. What she has just achieved is possible for others with similar wide hips 'problem'.

Compositional Meaning: The top compositional structure is made up of two halves: left (image) and right (text). The bottom occupies one-third of the advertisement. This acts as a sort of frameline to divide the placement of information. The bottom band is divided into three parts: the left contains the promotional details, the right the contact through sms and a smaller icon of the unnamed lady with trimmed hips and full straight details of the company on the bottom band. The structure division reflects the different degrees of prominence. The message "the way you trim your hips to stay hips" is primary, embodied by the unnamed lady, who has successfully shed a few inches from her 110cm hips. The far right placement indicates that this is new information or a new possibility. It therefore, deserves special attention.

4. DISCUSSION

The paper examines the way slimming advertisements work to frame fat bodies as unacceptable, ugly and repulsive. In the analysis of our data, we found the fear of fat to be one of the core tactics in some of the Malaysian slimming advertisements examined. We argue that these advertisements provide evidence of the way in which fat stigmatisation is enacted in discourse through a combination of linguistic and visual means.

We are living in an imaged-based culture that not only celebrates youthfulness and thinness, but defines the identity of people as individuals in terms of what they possess, buy, or look like. Representations of idealised bodies in most slimming advertisements construct a visual reality to convince women that what they see is real and achievable. On the other hand, there is a tendency to hide the fat or obese, and when it appears it is intended to humiliate and to generate a fear of fat. Positive images of fat women are not presented. The overemphasis in slimming practices on the 'ideal' body size and shape creates a kind of shackling fear: the fear of fat (Zuraidah and Lau, 2010). Fat becomes an oppressive force, an instrument of control over a woman's body size and shape. It does not just affect those who are obese; in fact, it keeps almost everyone on their toes. Cohen (1984:1), quoting from Judith Stein tells us that such overemphasis only serves as a form of social and psychological control.

"Fat oppression doesn't just affect fat people or fat women. It really works to keep everyone in line. It's a whole system of social control that keeps thin women absolutely terrified of being fat or thinking they are fat, and a whole lot of energy goes into dealing with fat. It keeps women who are medium-sized absolutely panic-stricken because they are right on the border. Those of us who are fat are over that border into some state of evil, basically, very much outside of what is permissible

within white American culture. If you are fat, then what you are supposed to do is strive desperately to get non-fat.”

By visually reducing the representations of a woman’s body to one prevailing image of the slim ideal and vilifying fat bodies, advertising asserts control of what women should look like, and if they do not conform they are considered as lacking self-control. This state of affairs is succinctly described by Mackenzie, cited in Cohen (1984: 9), as follows:

“Fear of fat grips America by its most tender part: its moral code. Fat, in short, is seen as bad, and thin is good. Preoccupied as people are with food and dieting, fat people and thin people alike seem to share the notion that fatness means a loss of self-control – considered the ultimate moral failure in our culture, and perhaps the most frightening of all fears.”

Pienaar (2006) agrees with Cohen that the stigmatisation of fatness reflects a moral coding of the body. The fat body symbolises moral transgression because it represents overindulgence, a lack of self-control and a lapse in managing the body in socially acceptable ways. For the presumed irresponsibility reflected in their body size, fat people are constructed as failed, unattractive and unproductive citizens. It is thus clear that fat individuals are blamed for their condition, for not having self-control. This lack of self-control manifests itself in stereotypical characteristics of fatness, that fatness is equivalent to laziness, clumsiness, gluttony and many other unfavourable attributes. All these point symbolically to inferiority and worthlessness. Being overweight becomes a social liability and invites ridicule. Inevitably, this results in the fear of fat and could lead to a cycle of internalised stigmatisation and self-deprecation, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and a strong desire to lose weight.

If this form of social and psychological control is unchecked and unchallenged, women will come to accept and internalise the ideology of ‘thin is good and fat is bad’ as a matter of common sense. Living in a fat-phobic world, an overweight woman may have negative conceptions of self, making it difficult to live a normal life. Obesity has a way of making the obese woman put her life on hold, as she lives on the self-proclaimed mantra, ‘when I’m thinner, then I’ll ...’ (Zuraidah and Lau, 2010). The quest for thinness drives women into deeper traumas of physical discomfort, self-denial and self-sacrifice - a kind of bondage worse than the Chinese foot binding practices of the past.

5. CONCLUSION

The exploitation of fear for promotional purposes is a serious matter and needs to be highlighted and addressed. Fat-phobic strategies have become so rampant and often repeated that they appear to be internalised by uninformed minds as common sense and natural. Advertisers never fail to ram home the message that fat is horribly ugly and needs to be rid of. It is little wonder that women are driven to try different methods to lose fat, by dieting, taking diet pills, skipping meals, starving themselves, succumbing to bulimic and anorexic practices, and resorting to body modification (Orbach, 2009; Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Harrison *et al.*, 2006; Hobbs *et al.*, 2006; Bordo, 1993; and Featherstone, 2000). These

encourage women to despise fat on their body in order to make them buy the slimming services and products advertised.

This paper may contribute to raising awareness and challenge contemporary notions of female beauty. It examines how slimming advertisements work to depict fatness as hideous. Hammond (1996) adds that obese people suffer from cultural consequences such as discrimination, economic disadvantage, social stigma and negative social interactions. Therefore, it is not surprising then that overweight women are at danger of being marginalised and oppressed.

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Zuraidah Mohd Don has over 100 publications, including contributions to the prestigious Journal of Pragmatics, Discourse & Society, IEICE Transactions, Language and Communication, and Text and Talk. Her research covers a wide field centred on the study of language, ranging from Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis to Corpus Linguistics, Language Structure and English Language Teaching. She aims to use linguistic expertise to make a positive contribution to the outside world. She has collaborated extensively with researchers in other disciplines, including computer studies and engineering.

Emily Lau Kui Ling's research interests revolve around interdisciplinary studies with special interest in advertising and gender, particularly, research into body image.

Appendix A: Visual Framework

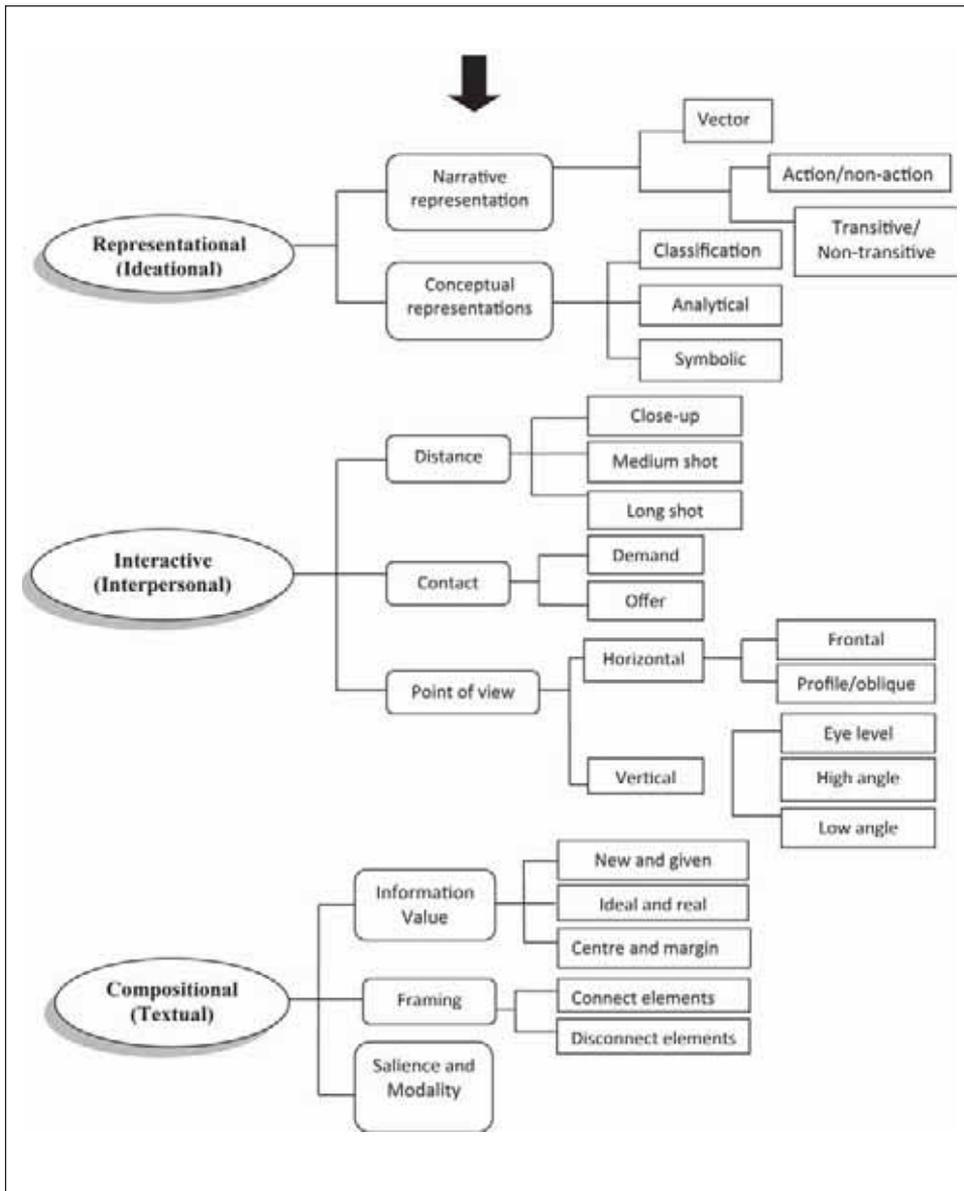


Figure 1. Visual social semiotics framework (adapted from Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996)

Appendix B:

Bizzy Body
THE SLIMMING EXPERT

1st
SUPER EXCELLENT BRAND

Get Ready for the biggest Weight Lost Campaign! Its coming!

Bizzy Body is inviting you to join us especially if you are faced with body fat or overweight issues.

If you are 22 years old and above, come and join us! In the next few months, you will be totally transformed and filled with confidence!

Attend the biggest weight lost campaign! You may choose to shed off in KG or INCHES and be entitled to a **FREE** slimming programme worth **RM1,088***

Bye bye **FAT!** Hello to a new you!

Event Date : 17-23 November 2008
Time : 10am - 9pm
Venue : Sunway Pyramid Orange Concourse LG2

Exciting activities awaits you

- Singing Performance by *Amy Wang*
- International New Talent Singing Competition 2004-Champion
- FREE Body Weight & Fat Percentage Analysis
- 23 Nov 2008 - Fashion Show
- Sure Win lucky draw
- FREE make over session & photo shooting*
- More activities...

First 50 customers can get 1 **FREE Lipo Sculpt Gel** worth **RM55!** Register with us now! First come first serve basis. While stocks last!

Please call **1-800-888-330** or log on to **www.bizzybody.com.my** for further details.

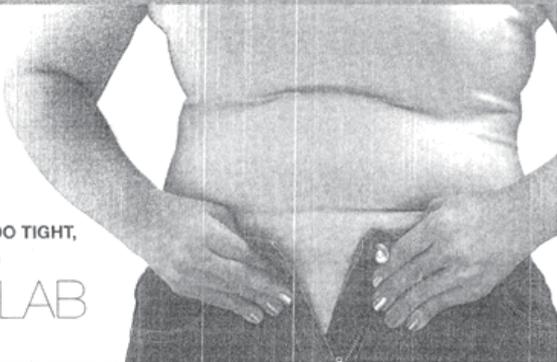
* Terms & Conditions apply (Results vary on individuals)

Co-sponsors: **KAI** **sensestudio** **M&A** **Keith Kee** **XIXILI**

Advertisement 1: "Bye bye fat! Hello to a new you!" (5 November, 2008)

Marie France Bodyline

**WHEN YOUR CLOTHES GET TOO TIGHT,
IT'S TIME TO
LOSE THE FLAB**



Start shedding the excess inches with Marie France Bodyline today.

After giving birth to my now 8 year old son, I couldn't regain my pre-pregnancy figure. On top of that, I battled with hormonal imbalances, and I couldn't control my diet as I had a weakness for pastries and cakes.

One day, my son's recently asked why I couldn't be slim and beautiful like his friends' moms. Little did he know he made me realize that I had to do something about my weight problem.

Determined to show up, I tried almost everything from diets to pills but none worked. In my last attempt, I approached Marie France Bodyline – and it was the best decision I've ever made!

After undergoing their proven and effective slimming programme, I now boast a slimmer, healthier body, and am proud to be a beautiful mom. If I can do it, so can you!

Call us at 1-800-88-7633 for a FREE personalised consultation.
Visit www.mariefrance.com for more information.



Weight before therapy:
114kg



Weight after therapy:
65kg

Total weight lost : 49kg
Total inch loss : 127 inches

77 SESSIONS FOR ONLY RM2,288

- 1D Lip Detoxification Therapy
- 2L Low Nano Infused Energy Treatments
- 1D Expert Micro Mineral, Herbal & Essential Oils Therapy
- 2L Lymphatic Enhancement Therapy
- 1D Mineral Sculpting Therapy
- 2L Mesotherapy Fat Dissolving Therapy
- 2L Low Nano Detoxification Therapy
- 1L Unassisted Slimming Therapy
- 2L Low Nano Energy Massage Therapy
- 2L Low Nano Energy Massage Therapy
- 1L Beautiful Mind Sessions
- 1L Advanced Skin Enhancement Programmes

11 to 28 SMS sessions with 101 Filmmaker Enhancement Programme + 1 Miracle Sculpting Facial

MFR approach
name, age,
preferred centre

send to
32996

Not valid for use at all Marie France Bodyline centres. Will be set as charged for each SMS.

NOW OPEN
New outlet at
Bukit Tinggi,
Klang!

Marie France Bodyline
THE WORLD'S LEADING BODYLINE SPECIALISTS
A member of Marie France International

Advertisement 2: “When your clothes get too tight, it’s time to lose the flab” (3 March, 2008)

UNISENSE
The Slimming Boutique

Hips before therapy: 110cm

Is this the way you trim your HIPS to stay hip?
There's a sensible way to trim your hip. It's UNISENSE!

SUPER EXCLUSIVE PACKAGE!
Limited to first 50 customers only!

NOW RM 1,388
Usual Price RM 8,010
60 THERAPIES*
for a full body slimming and body shaping programme

SMS us today and stand a chance to win 1 week signature ultrasonolipolysis worth RM375.00*

STEP 1
Text
UNISENSE-8788888
Preferred Location

eg SMS 7802041430007 Jada*MY

STEP 2
Send to
33733

Each SMS sent in will be charged RM0.50

Hips after therapy: 89cm

Unisense Health & Slimming Centre Sdn Bhd (B.C. 440748) Toll Free Customer Care Line: **1800 888 929**
www.unisenseintl.com

UNISENSE BOUTIQUE:

KUALA LUMPUR • KUALA Lot 74, GF, Jln. Ampang 1 Ampang Park, Kuala Lumpur	SELANGOR • SEREMBAN LOMBA 55, Jln. 5521/62 Seri Kembangan, 10 GF, Selayang Business Centre, 47100, SRT	IPAH • IPOH 12 GF, Persiaran Seri Meranti, Seri Meranti Business Centre	PERANG • PERANG 102, Jln. Air Hitam	JOHORE • JOHORE BAHRU Lot 10, 10B, Level 5, Plaza Pialang	SARAWAK • KUCHING GF, Lot 1016 & 1017, Bk 15, KLG 2, Bina 21, Jln. Bako	PUTRAJAYA • PUTRAJAYA No. 1041 & 1048, Lot 1041 & 1042, GF, Atria Commercial Centre, Jln. Selayang
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*Terms and conditions apply.

Advertisement 3: "Is this the way you trim your HIPS to stay hip?" (7 April, 2008)