Problematizing Femininity in Slimming Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of women in contemporary advertisements is varied. All advertisements seem to prescribe assumptions of what it means to be a woman. In isolation, each group of ads depicts a very narrow aspect of gender definition. Together, however, they reflect the complexity of contemporary womanhood. Along product and service weight-loss ads, slimming becomes a means of defining femininity, reconstituting it and disseminating it as direct knowledge of the social world as representations of reality. The images of femininity, as they appear in slimming advertisements, have the power to narrowly define and construct the 'feminine.' Advertisements, therefore, can be understood as carriers of a dominant ideology of femininity. Advertisements define what forms of femininity are acceptable and desirable. Experiences that contradict prevailing values of those given are either excluded or denied, reinforcing existing limited meanings of femininity. This paper examines the ideological construction of femininity through a close analysis of slimming advertisements found in Malaysia's leading English daily, *The Star*. Using the framework of Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis and Jewitt's (1999) visual social semiotics, the paper aims at discovering how language and visual means are exploited to define what forms of femininity are acceptable and desirable. Through this, the paper seeks to clarify some of the discursive mechanisms used in disseminating an ideological construct of femininity that spurs women's relentless pursuit of slimming.

Keywords: Advertisements, body, critical discourse analysis, femininity, ideology, slimming, visual social semiotics

INTRODUCTION

The scholarship of advertisements and its impact on body image is a growing concern globally. A slim body is seen as one of the mainstream concepts of feminine beauty

(Wolf, 2002; Albani, 2005; Ng, 2005; Lee & Fung, 2006; Thompson, Schaefer, & Menzel, 2012; Lau, 2013). The proposition of female attractiveness in terms of a slim body is one of the chief reasons behind increased female body dissatisfaction, body shame, eating disorders and even body modification (Chernin, 1983; Kilbourne, 1987, 1999a, 1999b; Featherstone, 2000; Bordo, 2003; Grogan, 2008; Orbach, 2009; Ata et al., 2013). However, exactly how an advertisement works to engage a person in such life-changing behaviour remains relatively understudied.

The present study problematised femininity in slimming advertisements. A close examination of the selected slimming advertisements was done to show how the concept of femininity in an advertisement works to influence people. Existing literature on the concern of advertising and body image has rarely dealt with this topic through the lens of semiotics and linguistics analysis. This paper attempts to fill this gap. This study is significant for several reasons: firstly, it delved into images of the ideal body promoted in slimming advertisements; secondly, it used the analytical framework of Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis and Jewitt's (1999) visual social semiotics as methods of enquiry on the written and visual content of slimming advertisements; and thirdly, it unmasked the ideological construction of femininity that subtly engages women of all ages into desiring this ideal body. The following sections outline the ideological roles of advertising

and propose a theoretical framework that combines semiotics and linguistics analysis to problematise femininity in slimming advertisements. This will uncover the opaque relationship between slimming and advertising – one being ideological and invested in the concept of femininity and the other, as a vehicle to promote and disseminate it.

Advertising and Its Ideological Roles

Advertising, in the past and present, has been and still is, using gender as one of its preeminent social resources, where gender is an integral part of the social structure and psychology of advertising (Jhally, 1987, p.134; Barthel, 1988, p.6; Mager & Helgeson, 2011; Zotos & Tsichla, 2014). Given the popularity of advertisements in our contemporary culture and the representations of gender within them, it is hardly a surprise that advertising has become a focus of analysis for researchers concerned with the ways in which advertisements influence the ways women view their body.

Admittedly, ever since the 1960s, the portrayal of women in advertising and their impact have been topics of contentious debate. The portrayal of women in contemporary advertisements is varied. In isolation, each type of advertisement depicts a very narrow aspect of gender definition. Together, however, they reflect the complexity of contemporary womanhood. From the head to the toe: skin care, hair care, cosmetic, fashion, perfume, jewellery, slimming, just to name a few, are some of the advertisements that

target women exclusively. At best, they all intend to enhance female beauty; at worst, they are really saying that every female has something physically wrong that needs correction, either through the products or services promoted. The growing concern with the ways in which women have been constructed within popular media is founded on how media representations constitute gender difference, rather than simply reflect or represent that difference.

Many critics have described advertising as "a bellwether of cultural trends, a mirror of social values, and a powerful, usually malevolent force that shapes those values." (Duffy, 1994, p. 5). Such descriptions convey the heavyweight impact of advertising's influence. What most criticism is uneasy with is the troubling fact that advertisements prescribe assumptions of what it means to be a woman (Berger, 1972; Williamson, 1978; Kilborne, 1987, 1999; Duffy, 1994; Wood, 2001; Wolf, 2002; Zuraidah, 2003; Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008; Zotos & Tsichla, 2014). In fact, John Berger (1972), the art historian, went even further by noting that advertising had infiltrated and become a central part of the culture of consumer society. In its power to ascribe and communicate meaning, advertising moved from being part of the business enterprise to becoming a social institution, replacing the functions traditionally held by art or religion (Berger, 1972; Williamson, 1978). What appears to be problematic is that advertisements do not just reflect the social world but a highly selective reconstitution of day-to-day life. As Saco

(1992, p. 25) contended, while the meaning of femininity and masculinity is constructed through advertisement representations, these constructions are usually projected as though they hold direct knowledge of the social world, that is, representations of reality. In the context of this paper's investigation, these problems pertaining to advertising's ideological functions are in line with Shelley Budgeon's (1994, pp. 56–7) concerns: The images of femininity, as they appear in advertisements, have the power to narrowly define and construct the 'feminine'. Therefore, feminist analysis of these mass-produced and mass-circulated images has been a struggle over meaning. This struggle has been motivated by a concern for the implications that definitions of 'femininity' have for women's lives. The importance of understanding the images of women in advertising, as well as the power these images have in defining femininity, is to be found in the connection between these images and the wider social context within which they exist. Budgeon's emphasis on the "importance of understanding the images of women in advertising, as well as the power these images have in defining femininity" cannot be ignored. In contemporary society, women are becoming obsessed about their physical appearance. This can be seen from the variety of diet products, thriving gym culture and the alarming rate of cosmetic surgery for beauty's sake (Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Orbach, 2009; Dworkin, 2009; Brooks, 2004; Lirola, 2012). Even the natural process of ageing has become an unacceptable fact of life (Zuraidah,

2003; Carter, 2014). This has tremendous rippling repercussions in the wider social context. First and foremost, the co-optation of female insecurity as a capital for the consumer market has become insidiously rampant. To profit from someone's fear is as good as daylight robbery. Second, the psychological implications are further noted when anorexia, bulimia or many other forms of body dysmorphic disorders have become uncontrollable social issues among the young and old. Third, and certainly not the last, in the macro social contexts, we see how a narrow meaning of femininity has been perpetuated for economic purposes. At its best, advertising alerts us to the potential for unintended effects of advertising messages and portrayal of women; at their worst, advertising perpetuates sexist stereotypes and encourages exploitation by marketers (Duffy, 1994; Zotos & Tsichla, 2014).

Femininity: A Social and Cultural Apparatus

The word 'femininity', like the term 'gender', is understood as a social, symbolic creation. It is neither innate nor necessarily immutable. Gender, from a vast repertoire of gender studies, is understood to be socially constructed and acquired through interaction in a social world and it is malleable (Coates, 1971; Jhally, 1989; Kilbourne, 1999a, 1999b; Wood, 2001; Sunderland, 2006; Deutsch, 2007; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). Wood (2001, pp. 22-3) explained how a culture constructs and perpetuates meanings of gender by endowing biological

sex with social significance. In Wood's words:

> *The meaning of gender grows out of a society's values, beliefs, and preferred ways of organizing collective life. A culture constructs and sustains meanings of gender by investing biological sex with social significance. […] To be masculine is to be strong, ambitious, successful, rational, and emotionally controlled. […] To be feminine is to be attractive, deferential, unaggressive, emotional, nurturing, and concerned with people and relationships. Those who embody the cultural definition of femininity still don't outdo men (especially their mates), disregard others' feelings, or put their needs ahead of others. Also, "real women" still look good (preferably very pretty and/or sexy), adore children, and care about homemaking.*

Drawing from this, femininity is also malleable in every sense as it is constructed within social interaction and its norms, conventions and relations are constantly negotiated. Wood (2001, p. 25) added, "individuals who internalize cultural prescriptions for gender reinforce traditional views by behaving in ways that support prevailing ideas about masculinity and femininity." This also extends to support the assumption that the body is an entity that is not immutable and subscribes to

social construction (Zuraidah, 2003; Frith et al., 2005; Pienaar, 2006; Zuraidah, 2009; Wilkinson, 2015). Advertising perpetually sells ideal beauty as young, with flawless skin, perfect curves and features – all these "manufactured" as the advertisers deemed fit and in the process, distorts reality or in Zuraidah's (2003, p. 265) deft observation, "[o]nce a certain look is sanctioned by enough people, it redefines normal appearance, even if society has crossed over the borderline of sanity." It is exactly when a distorted reality is sanctioned as acceptable and normal, that the ideology of femininity is considered most successful. van Dijk (1998, p. 8) in developing "a new notion of ideology that serves as the interface between social structure and social cognition", informed us that: "[…] ideologies may be very succinctly defined as the basis of the social representations, shared by members of a group." This means that ideologies allow people, as group members, to organise the multitude of social beliefs about what is the case, good or bad, right or wrong, for them, and to act accordingly [emphasis author's]. The normalisation of even a distorted reality calls for the need to pathologise femininity: what is to be considered as a beautiful face, body, complexion or body shape? Messages of femininity are, over time, rooted in a culture and shared by kith and kin, literature, media and especially, the beauty industry. It is a site of cultural imprint where the cultural imperative is that women's bodies require size control, unblemished fair faces and certain looks that are critically seen as

being the product of discursive practices and social practices.

Slimming advertisements, as a specific type of discourse in the process of promoting services and selling products, offers stereotypical notions of the appearance of women that reinforce socially constructed ideas of femininity. This is a manipulation of the essentialist characteristics of women, setting them in a highly fixed mould of how a woman should behave and look like. Hitherto, what constitutes femininity and beauty in contemporary culture needs to be re-examined.

METHODOLOGY

This paper examined the ideological construction of femininity through a close analysis of the slimming advertisements found in Malaysia's leading English daily – *The Star*. The data comprised advertisements on slimming products and services collected over 18 months, from July 2007 to December 2008. Slimming advertisements as a genre, and a form of discourse and system of language, have not been thoroughly researched. It is fertile ground for an interrogation of the linguistics and visual exploitations that lead to a rich site of contestation and ambiguity in the production of meaning. The intersecting of different disciplines (gender, media and applied linguistics), therefore, constitutes an attempt for the analysis of linguistics and visual components in advertisements and how they are salient elements in the process of the production and consolidation of meanings.

To critique ideologies implicit in advertisements, a methodology anchored in critical discourse analysis was warranted. Critical discourse analysis (henceforth, CDA) is entrenched in critical theory and is used to locate representations of ideology within a particular discourse.[1] The chief strength of CDA lies in its 'critical' aims that enable it to champion social issues and forms of inequality in society by making apparent opacity of the issues concerned. van Dijk (2000) informed that CDA is not a singular unitary framework, but rather, some of its main analytical tools stem from various disciplines: systemic functional linguistics, pragmatics, speech act theory and of recent development, visual semiotic. CDA uses these analytical tools to disclose encoded ideologies implicit in various texts. Central to CDA is analysing, describing, interpreting and critiquing social life portrayed in texts. It aims to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality and discrimination and how these sources are produced, maintained, legitimised and perpetuated within specific social, economic, political and historical contexts (van Dijk, 1988). CDA attempts to illuminate ways in which the dominant forces in a society construct versions of reality that favour their interests. By uncovering such practices, CDA supports the victims of such marginalisation and oppression, stirs awakening and even encourages resistance.

In this paper, the theoretical framework is based on Norman Fairclough's CDA. According to Fairclough (1993, p. 135), CDA:

Aims to systematically explore often opaque relationship of casuality and determination between a) discursive practices, events and texts and b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations and power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor of securing power and hegemony.

The main thrust of CDA is to unmask ideological assumptions that are hidden in the words of our written or spoken discourse. CDA aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships between discursive practices, texts and events and wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes. It strives to examine how these non-transparent relationships are a factor in securing power and hegemony and it draws attention to power imbalances, social inequities, nondemocratic practices and other forms of injustice in hopes of spurring people to corrective action (Fairclough, 1989).

In this paper, to critique ideology implicit in the slimming advertisements, CDA takes on the descriptive framework of visual social semiotics.[2] As slimming advertisements are rich in visual components, this analytical tool is considered to be most appropriate. Jewitt's (1999) visual social semiotics

approach is referred to as the consideration of the 'social' dimension and helps to show the connection between these images and the wider social context. Jewitt also stressed on the role of human agency and social context in the construction of meaning.

The following is a replication of Jewitt's (1999) framework of visual social semiotics analysis of visual communication. Jewitt adopted the metafunctions in Kress and van Leeuwen's choice of

terminology: representation, interactive and compositional.[3] Each of these three is further expanded to its sub-categories. All three metafunctions carry significant weight in the construction of meaning. However, in this paper, the analysis is limited to the interactive metafunction in order to allow more space for in-depth analysis. Nonetheless, with just the interactive metafunction, the detailed and systematic analysis is sufficient to demonstrate how images in slimming
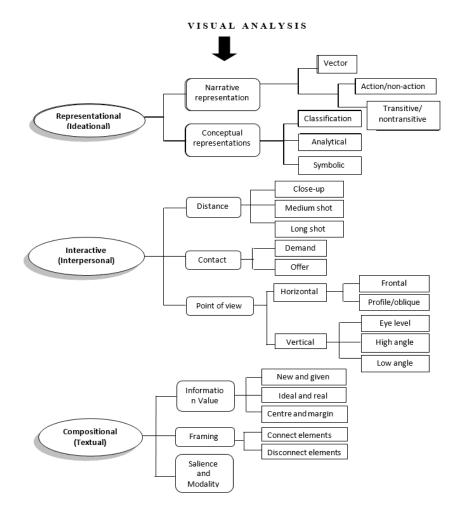

Figure 1. Visual social semiotics key dimensions (adapted from Jewitt, 1999).

advertisements contribute to the ideological notion of feminine appeal or femininity.

DISCUSSION

The analysis explored a discursive practice in a particular site, namely slimming advertisements. The analysis included both written and visual text types. The first closely followed Fairclough's (1989, 1995 & 2003), analysis of discursive practice and focussed on the content and linguistic features of the selected slimming advertisements to disclose the ideological construction of femininity. As for the visual components, Jewitt's (1999) visual social semiotics was employed to disclose the exploitation of visuals in reinforcing stereotypes of feminine beauty. These theoretical frameworks demonstrate how the female body image is constituted in advertising and how the ideas of femininity are relegated to strait-jacketed ideals.

We see how slimming ideals are constructed in visual and written forms to stir up feelings of shortcomings, either regarding negative body images or general feelings of inadequacy. With these crippling feelings of dissatisfaction, insecurity and even fear, inevitably one is compelled to feel a need to shape up. In this way, slimming advertisements play a role in constructing, disseminating and perpetuating ideologies about femininity as 'truth'. In this paper, selected advertisements were examined closely to underline the prevailing ideological construction of femininity. 'Marie France' is a renowned slimming centre in Malaysia and in many other countries as well. In Malaysia, its publicity is rampant in major newspapers. Selected from 'Marie France' are five advertisements featuring three spokespersons.

The following are the tagline and bodycopy from these advertisements:

Extract 1 (Appendix 1)
FLAUNT SLENDER, TONED ARMS

> *Flabby, sagging arms will now be a thing of the past. The experts at Marie France Bodyline can help you trim away those unwanted inches. At Marie France Bodyline, we understand your body. Different problem areas require specific targeting methods. Our slimming programmes use a combination of advanced technologies all aimed specifically at removing stubborn flab and toning the arm area. You'll feel confident with your new fit and fabulous arms!*

Extract 2 (Appendix 2)
THIGH ENVY

> *Actresses have nightmares too! Me? I've always been a victim of thunder thighs and chunky legs. Months of vain attempts to keep trim by dancing did nothing for me. This, coupled with my hectic schedule and diet struggles only served to discourage me further – as I always ended up exhausted and unhappy. Then I realized, "I can't be doing this forever!" So I turned to Marie*

France Bodyline for help. What a good move!

There, I was quickly introduced to BioThermie Plus, an excellent fat reduction programme that targets the most stubborn areas to help you shed excess pounds. The next thing I knew, I looked in the mirror one day and saw a total body transformation! Finally, I had the shapely, toned legs that I've always dreamed of. Thanks to Marie France Bodyline, I'm now the envy of all women. And I say, "Hey, if you've got it, flaunt it!"

Extract 3 (Appendix 3)
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 once svelte 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 innocently 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. Desperate to shape up, I tried almost everything from diets to pills but none worked. In the last attempt, I approached Marie France Bodyline – and it was

the best decision I've ever made! After undergoing their proven and effective slimming programmes, I now boast a slimmer, healthier body, and am proud to be a beautiful mom. If I can do it, so can you!

Extract 4 (Appendix 4)
IS YOUR TOP SPILLING OUT FROM OVER-EATING?

Let us help you trim your waistline and shape your body. Expanding waistline and unsightly bulges? Fight the flab with Marie France Bodyline. With our expertise and wide range of revolutionary programmes, your individual slimming needs will be well taken care of. Our proven results, up-to-date technology and thousands of satisfied customers make us the one name that women trust when it comes to slimming. So come to us and embark on a journey to reveal a slimmer, sexier you!

Extract 5 (Appendix 5)
BATTLE YOUR BULGE

Don't wait till you pop out of your clothes. It's time you did something about those stubborn bulges. Luckily, slimming experts Marie France Bodyline has what it takes to help you slim down and show off a sensational silhouette. The Laser Pulse System (LPS) consists of a 3-pronged approach

that targets and breaks down stubborn fat and reduces cellulite by stimulating cell metabolism and boosting the lipolysis (fat reduction) effect. No more worries about cellulite, unsightly bulges and saggy skin as you can now flaunt a stunning figure. Our proven results, advanced technology and thousands of satisfied customers make us the one name women trust when it comes to body perfection. Come to us and achieve a slimmer and more sensational body, just like Andrea!

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In the following section, the range of discursive mechanisms employed in the ideological construction of femininity is discussed at length. These discursive mechanisms operate in different levels: from lexicalisation to discourse practice.

In examining these taglines and bodycopy, the recurrent 'problems' to promote feminine beauty always revolve around an obscure problem, namely a bulging tummy, flabby arms, thunder thighs, unsightly cellulite and so forth. The irony of this is that the advertisements harp on flaws to 'entice' women into buying their services or products. The tagline, usually, is a short catchy statement to arrest one's attention. It either encourages desire or zooms in on problems respectively: "Flaunt slender, toned arms", "Thigh envy" or "Battle your bulge", "When your clothes get too tight, it's time to lose the flab" and at times, in

the form of a question, "Is your top spilling out from over-eating?" By giving specific qualities of what is desirable for one's arms or thighs, the purpose is to stir a desire to have those "slender" and "toned" arms or thighs. At times, even linguistic feature like the alliteration of bilabial voiced plosive, /b/ in "Battle Your Bulge" is used to enhance the notion that being overweight is a "battle" in life; there is a sense of war-like imagery where the need to combat the "bulge" is likened to undertaking a military task. Rhetorical questions are also used to advance the need to drop some pounds. The tagline, on the other hand, thrives on negative body images of "bulge," "flab" etc. to constantly remind women of the need for physical trimming. By constantly bombarding women with negative body images, slimming advertisements peddle and reinforce the hyped-up slimness as a core quality of femininity or feminine appeal.

Bodycopy, on the other hand, usually expands on the key tagline, with details to further support the negative body image, thereby making body slimming a crucial matter for women. Likewise, bodycopy oscillates between creating desire and highlighting flaws. In suggesting these ideals ("You'll feel confident with your new fit and fabulous arms!"; "a slimmer, sexier you!"; "slim down and show off a sensational silhouette"; "flaunt a stunning figure" and "achieve a slimmer and more sensational body, just like Andrea!"), women are bombarded with slim and trim ideals. The choice of celebrities as

spokespersons usually strengthens the message as celebritiy-worship is pervasive pop culture today. The phrase, "just like Andrea!" creates a desirability and possibility to be as attractive as Andrea. Wykes and Gunter (2005, p. 52) informed us that these voices act as "subjects of social construction" of what it is to be a woman.

The problem seems to be that so many of the images offered to women in the media are the same – slender, fair, fit, young, sexual – and the goods sold to women are sold to 'help' them achieve that image whilst, at the same time, women are expected increasingly to occupy a large variety of roles – sex symbol, career woman, mother, wife, housewife, athlete. [...]. All women modify, some morph and some mutilate in the effort to define themselves – all of us are subject to the same pressures and so to some extent all women suffer as subjects of social construction.

On the same continuum, demeaning women through drilling them to feel more and more dissatisfaction with their bodies is yet another tactic to further reinforce this unrealistic ideal. Some of the words, "flabby, sagging arms," "stubborn fat," "thunder thigh, chunky legs," "expanding waistline," "unsightly bulges," and "cellulite" drum in fat-removing must-do. This creates body shape dissatisfaction so much so that "women tend to regard themselves as bigger than they really are" (Wykes & Gunter, 2005, p. 5).

From here, the prescription of cures is made available and these claims are supported by various methods: motivational, creating desire, focussing on flaws and medico-scientific genres, just to name a few. Naturally, this elevates the advertiser to a hoisted vantage point as the expert voice and source of knowledge to give readers the kind of professional advice needed. By ascribing clinical identity through affiliation with technologically advanced or medico-scientific genres of body slimming, the advertiser becomes the authorial discourse of 'chosen' feminine appeal and further endorses the cultural context of the construction of the ideals of femininity. That said, perhaps the question to ask at this point is, "Is femininity relegated to outward appearance alone?" From these advertisements, the messages seem to be so.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

In this section, the interactive meaning from the visual in slimming advertisements will be explored closely in terms of the paper's research goal. Jewitt and Oyama (2001, p. 145) stated that, "[i]mages can create particular relations between viewers and the world inside the picture frame. In this way they interact with viewers and suggest the attitude viewers should take towards what is being represented." Such interaction is to project the represented world inside the picture frame to viewers and to invite them to respond to it. Jewitt (1999, p. 273), following Kress and van Leeuwen

(1996), delineated that there are three interactive structures that play a key role in the realisation of these meanings: distance, contact and point of view. Jewitt added that together they can "create complex and subtle relations between the represented and the viewer." We will take a close look at each of the interactive structures closely and see how interactive meanings are played out in the selected slimming advertisements.

Contact

Jewitt and Oyama (2001, p. 146) explained that when the represented people in the picture frame look directly at the viewer, they attempt to "make contact" with the viewers. This, in turn, establishes an imaginary relation between these two parties. According to Jewitt and Oyama, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) relegated such pictures as being "demand" pictures where

> *The people in the picture symbolically demand something from the viewer facial expression and gestures then fill in what exactly they 'demand' in this way: they can demand deference, by unblinkingly looking down on the viewers, or pity, by pleadingly looking up at them; they can address viewers with an ingratiating smile or unsettle them with a penetrating stare [...].*

Jewitt and Oyama (2001, p. 146) explained that "[g]estures can further modify what is demanded, as in the famous 'Your Country Needs YOU!' recruitment poster. Without this kind of 'imaginary contact' we look quite differently at the people in the picture frame. We 'observe' them in a detached way and impersonal manner as though they are specimen in a display case. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) called such pictures "offers" – an "offer of information" is made [...]."[4]

In all the five selected slimming advertisements, there are three spokespersons. Andrea Fonseka (Appendices 1, 4 & 5), Bernice Liu (Appendix 2) and an unnamed lady (Appendix 3) appear in long shots and seem to have something to offer to viewers. By appearing in long shots, they are showing the full length of their shapely and slender bodies to the viewers; the unnamed lady posed for before and after shots. Standing position, dressing and facial expressions all sum up what they have to offer to the viewers. Clad in body hugging tops and either hot pants or short flowy skirts, the spokespersons showcase their feminine silhouette. The gleeful facial expressions show that they are offering their happiness, satisfaction, beauty and most of all, their shapely bodies for the viewers' consumption. The information offered is that the woman pictured is desirable simply for her good looks; the viewers therefore, are drawn to share in their attractive appeal. The direct gaze at the viewer attempts at eye-contact and thus, establishes an imaginary relationship between the represented and the

viewer. Again, the ideological construction of femininity ideals projected through these images constantly reminds women that they are synonymous with their appearance.

Apart from the interactive structure of contact, it is also useful to understand the social context of the use of celebrities like Andrea Fonseka and Bernice Liu. Both are well-known personalities in Asia.[5] Their representation conveys that even celebrities struggle with weight issues and opt for slimming centres. If they can do it, so can you! There is a connection made between successful people and (anonymous) you. Therefore if you do what they do, you will also be viewed as successful, confident individuals who are admired and looked up to. This includes the emotional, intellectual and psychological dimension in these slimming adverts. If you do as they do, you will be emotionally happy and fulfilled, psychologically well-adapted and successful in your life. The physical construct determines the other dimensions of your personality.

Distance

Another way of discerning the level of interactive meaning can be seen in the 'distance' of people, places or things as they appear in the viewer. This suggestion of distance can either narrow or expand the gap between the viewer and the represented in the images. Similar to our day-to-day interaction, the norms of social relations decide the distance we keep from each other. This, according to Jewitt and Oyama (2001,

p. 146), "translates into the 'size of frame' of shots." They further explicated that,

> [t]o see people close up is to see them in the way we would normally only see people with whom we are more or less intimately acquainted. Every detail of their face and their expression is visible. We are so close to them we could almost touch them. They reveal their individuality and their personality. To see people from a distance is to see them in the way we would normally only see strangers, people whose lives do touch on ours. We see them in outline, impersonally, as types rather than as individuals. This does not mean of course that the people we see represented in close-up are actually close to use, or vice versa. It means they are represented as though they belong or should belong to 'our group', and that the viewer is thereby addressed as a certain kind of person.

Distance, in other words, projects the possible relationship between the represented in the image and the viewers. Borrowed from the terminology of electronic media, a close-up, according to Jewitt and Oyama (2001, p. 146),

> [a] close-up (head and shoulders or less) suggests an intimate/ personal relationship; a medium shot (cutting off the human figure

somewhere between the waist and the knees) suggests a social relationship [...]; and a 'long shot' (showing the full figure, whether just fitting in the frame or even more distant) suggests an impersonal relationship.

However, in the case of slimming advertisements, the long-shot is usually used to enable viewers to have a good look at the slender shape, sometimes captured sideways, to further enhance the slim appeal. Thus, in the case of the selected slimming advertisements, the use of close-ups was not exactly to suggest an impersonal relationship as suggested by Jewitt and Oyama. In the case of slimming advertisements, close-up and medium shots may not deliver results as good as do long shots. In close shots, you see everything, and everybody knows perfection is impossible. Long shots add to the idealisation and possibilities of perfection offered by the ads. They foster the 'dream' and vaguely suggest that 'you too can be like this' without going into the details – which would only flush out all the imperfections of the person in the picture. Likewise with medium shots: they do not provide flattering shots of the represented silhouette. Therefore, with slimming advertisements, this interactive structure is employed with a twist, not as the original framework would have it, as "an impersonal relationship." Rather, in slimming advertisements, the long shot is fully utilised to achieve the commercial goal:

to get the viewer to desire the represented body shape.

Point of View

Another means of drawing out potential meaning is 'point of view' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, pp. 135–53). This can be drawn from horizontal or vertical dimensions. In Jewitt's (1997, 1999) study, which explored the visual representation of male heterosexuality in British sexual health materials aimed at people aged 13 to 19 years old, she described how in the horizontal dimension, frontal angles were used to increase audience identification and involvement with represented participants and vertical angles were used to represent men as powerful in particular roles. Jewitt and Oyama (2001, p. 135) clarified:

'power', 'detachment', 'involvement', and so on, are not 'the' meanings of these angles. They are an attempt to describe a meaning potential, a field of possible meanings, which need to be activated by the producers and viewers of images. But this field of possible meanings is not unlimited. If you want to express that something or someone is impressive and powerful, you are unlikely to choose a high angle, and if you see someone depicted from a high angle, you are unlikely to conclude that he or she is represented as an impressive and powerful person

[…] symbolic relations are not real relations, and it is precisely this which makes point of view a semiotic resource. It can 'lie'. Photographs can symbolically make us relate as an equal to people who in fact have very considerable power over our lives (for example, politicians), or it can make us look in a detached way at people who we are involved with […].

In saying this, what appears in an image may not be entirely true; it is only a representation and functions at the symbolic level. Yet, this symbolic projection is the very grounds for viewers to believe in the possibilities, ideals or parallel between the represented and themselves. From here, what can be said of the frontal shots of Bernice Liu (Appendix 2) and unnamed lady (Appendix 3) are varied. While Liu and the unnamed lady's frontal angles are used to increase audience identification, the former invites desirability while the latter invites repulsion at her fatness or even admiration, especially with her new slimming success self-pose next to the before-shot. If you are fat, you are anonymous and your name is not even mentioned, as in the case of the unnamed lady; you vanish into the background. You are projected as not successful or happy or fulfilled. But if you could slim down, like Liu and Fonseka did, then everyone will notice you because you are considered beautiful, confident, successful, happy and fulfilled. You can be famous too! In addition, in the spokespersons' apparent display of their bodies, we also see how a muffin and two torsos make up the collage of images in a single ad in Appendices 3, 4 and 5. Each image contributes to building up the aim of Marie France: to entice viewers into joining their slimming services. Appendix 3 shows an unidentified someone struggling to zip up her trousers, obviously to illustrate the tagline "When your clothes get too tight, it's time to lose the flab." The same strategies are seen in Appendices 4 and 5. The image of a muffin "spilling out" from a cropped pair of trousers in Appendix 4
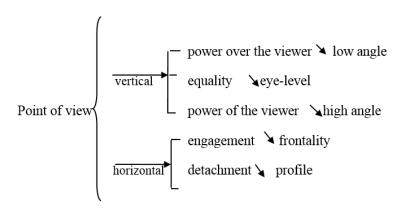

Figure 2. Resource of 'point of view' (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001).

and the super-imposed torso buttoning up, with the tagline "Battle your Bulge" across the image of Appendix 5, carry the same message: the co-optation of women's body image dissatisfaction drives the inclination to 'buy' the suggested ideas of femininity.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen from the analyses of these advertisements, advertising is a forceful carrier of the dominant ideology of femininity. In these slimming advertisements, the dominant meanings of femininity are limited to body appearance. The definitions are narrow and pertain only to the physical. It is implied that the physical is the 'doorway' to many positive psychosocial aspects in life: for example, friendship, romance, confidence, happiness and success. This romantic lie is insidious because it pretends that if you lose a few pounds (physical), you will find eternal bliss, romance, success and many other non-physical fulfilments. Although body image is only an aspect of female beauty, slimming becomes a means of defining femininity, reconstituting it and disseminating it as direct knowledge of the social world, that is, representations of reality in a larger social system. The images of femininity, as they appear in slimming advertisements, have narrowly defined and constructed femininity. These advertisements define what forms of femininity are acceptable and desirable. Such a limited view can displace people, male and female alike. In addition, experiences that contradict with prevailing values of those given are either excluded or denied. Rigid definitions of femininity relegate those who do not fit in to a constant state of insecurity. For the single person, they strive to achieve the feminine appeal so that they are attractive to the opposite sex and fit the bill in the social norm of must-marry-before-it-is-too-late; for the married person, the constant striving is to lose post-natal weight, portrayed as one of the main concerns. Other constant battles throughout a lifetime include having to ward off the signs of ageing and the need to maintain a flawless complexion and shapely body, among others. This, as mentioned earlier, has translated into gym culture, diet fads and a booming beauty-line industry.

Critical analysis of representations of women in advertisements is necessary to understand how ideology is produced, maintained, legitimised and disseminated. Only through exposing such narrow definitions as being ideologically invested, can these representations be critically challenged and questioned. The importance of understanding the images of women in advertising, as well as the power these images have in defining femininity, is to be found in the connection between these images and the wider social context where notions such as slim body appeal are exploited for the profit of the beauty industry.

The findings above, in a way, have extended the previous research in the disciplines of gender and media. The major lines of advertising research focus on three areas: i) content analyses, where a variety of analytical tools are used to establish sexism;

ii) audience or reaction studies, which measure responses to advertising portrayal and strategy; and iii) critical analyses, which concentrate on the implications of advertising to society (Duffy, 1994). By drawing on the descriptive frameworks of visual social semiotics and CDA, this study highlighted that a network of different disciplines is possibly more enriching. Linguistics and semiotics as modes of enquiry help to expose and challenge the narrowed definition of feminine appeal as suggested in slimming ads. This study explored and challenged the main ideology of a slim body image. It is hoped that this study will help women to avoid falling prey to the 'promises' of slimming products and services. It creates awareness and a constructive 'suspicion' of such promotional materials.

END NOTES

[1]Although a young science, CDA can be traced as far back as Marxist discourse, and its manifesto is more closely drawn from the members of the Frankfurt school comprising philosophers such as Habermas, Adorno, Benjamin, Althuser, Bakhtin, Gramsci, Foucault and Pecheux (van Dijk, 1993). Stemming from Habermas' (1973) critical theory, CDA aims to highlight social issues that are mediated by mainstream ideology and power relationships, all perpetuated by means of communication in written or spoken words.

[2]The analytical tool of visual social semiotics is based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) theory of the grammar of visual design. It is a descriptive framework that attempts a detailed and systematic description of each of the images based on 18 descriptive dimensions. For further reading, see Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) *Reading Images* and Jewitt's (1999) "A

social semiotic analysis of male heterosexuality in sexual health resources: The case of images".

[3]Kress and van Leeuwen, on the other hand, adapt these three metafunctions from the work of linguist M. A. K. Halliday (1985).

[4]The terms 'offer' and 'demand' were taken from Halliday (1985), who uses them to distinguish between different classes of speech act, questions and commands, which 'demand', respectively, 'information' and 'goods and services', and statements and offers, which 'offer', respectively, 'information' and 'goods and services'.

[5]Andrea Fonseka is the title holder of Miss Malaysia Universe 2004. She was also, for two consecutive years, voted the world's sexiest woman by FHM Singapore's Top 100 Sexiest Women. Bernice Liu, on the other hand, is no less a celebrity. Hailing from Vancouver, Canada, she rose to fame after being crowned Miss Chinese International 2001. Subsequently, in Hong Kong, she gained stardom as a singer, actress and commercial model. She was TVB's top earning artist in 2007 with earnings of HK$4.8 million.

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APPENDIX 1

"Flaunt Slender, Toned Arms" (*The Star*, July 23, 2007)

APPENDIX 2

"Thigh Envy" (*The Star,* October 3, 2007)

APPENDIX 3

"When your clothes get too tight, it's time to lose the flab" (*The Star,* March 3, 2008)

APPENDIX 4

"Is your top spilling out from over eating?" (*The Star*, October 6, 2007)

APPENDIX 5

"Battle your Bulge" (*The Star,* November 10, 2008)