

Modern Family Institution: A study on Gender Representations in Malaysian Advertisement

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Abstract

Modern family institutions in Malaysia differ significantly from pre-modern times. This article will examine the concept of “family” by tracing its origin and analyzing what constitutes a “family” in Malaysian society. The authors argue that Western modernity’s ideas on understanding the concept of family influenced how Malay directed its outlook on their advertisement. The study argues that a patriarchal order exists in Malay society and Connell’s theory of gender and power serve as a framework in analyzing the traits. Of all advertisements analyzed, there are certain significant traits exhibit such as equality in the occupational segregation and cooperation between men and women in childcare duties which weaken the “hegemonic masculinity” as suggested by Connell. However, there are the traits of patriarchal order in the society particularly in the domestic responsibilities which need to be address since it creates imbalance division of labor in a household between two genders.

1. Introduction

The eroding of family values in modern times is a universal concern due to the accelerating changing spheres in family institutions. Sociologists studying family institutions in modern times stress the importance of studying family as an institution which shapes the outlook of certain societies. The issue of changing relationships within family institutions in modern times has become a heated debate since the family is the main institution that controls the most important unit within society. As Anthony Giddens puts it, the family serves as a convergence point for various societal developments that have a broad impact. These trends include the growing gender equality, the significant participation of women in the workforce, shifts in sexual conduct and expectations, and the evolving link between home and work. Giddens (2006:377) offers an interesting insight into the study of a traditional family when he argues that reverting to the traditional family structure is not an available option. The conventional notion of a family as we think of it, he argues, has never actually been because there were numerous oppressive aspects associated with families in the past that render them unsuitable as a model for contemporary

society. Giddens also argues that the irrevocable social changes that have occurred have greatly impacted previous forms of marriage and the family (Ibid).

The modern family institutions in contemporary Malay society have gone through multiple layers of transformation from the early nineteenth century up to the twentieth century and gradually inculcated into the Malay worldview up until the current era. The introduction of modern education institutions in the Malay state together with the economic advancement beginning in the early 20th century argued by Gullick (1987: 1) became the turning point for Malaysia in shaping what modern Malaysia today, even though many others assert that changes has taken place earlier than that. The fundamental changes in the education system surely have become the main instrument in shaping the outlook of modern Malay individuals. Though we didn't discuss much about the educational practices here, it is sufficient to note that education has become a catalyst for modernization attempts in Malay society at large.

2. Concept of Family and Marriages According to Western Society versus Malay society

The adoption of the family concept from Western civilization has to do with the historical experiences of the Malay Archipelago with colonialization. The advancement of the British in the region during the nineteenth century shaped the worldviews of the natives and instituted most of its social life until recent times. There is a stark difference in how the concept of marriage and family is in the worldview of both Western and Malay society in the historical account. Giddens argues that the notion of romantic love is the foundation of European matrimony, and the primary influence is what he coined as "affective individualism". It is anticipated that couples will establish marriages based on mutual affection, which is derived from personal attraction and compatibility. He suggests that in the modern world, romantic love has become a naturalised aspect of marriage; it appears to be a common aspect of human existence, rather than a unique characteristic of contemporary culture (Giddens, 2006:339). However, this is a stark contrast with what constituted a family in pre-modern times. Family in pre-modern times didn't have an idea of having long-term relationships and falling in love just like what we have today. During the early modern era in Europe, royal and aristocratic marriages were frequently arranged with the primary objective of enhancing or sustaining family status, or for political reasons. And while "arrangements" are now less prevalent globally, they continue to be the norm in specific South Asian communities (Giddens, 2006:330).

The ideas of romantic and intimacy only existed recently which contributed largely to the widespread continuously in romantic literature and did not gain popularity until the late 18th century. Romantic love, in contrast with the almost universal compulsions of passionate love, entailed idealising its object. The concept of romantic love roughly coincided with the rise of the novel as a literary genre, and the spread of romantic novels had an important role in disseminating the idea (Radway, 1984). Women associated romantic love with presenting stories illustrating how the relationship could lead to personal fulfilment (Giddens, 2006:330).

In contrast, the concept of affection between individuals before marriage seldom occurs in Malay society, which somehow resembles the pre-modern society in Western civilization. Love marriages without parental consent are extremely rare; it would result in punishment under the Indian penal code (before Malay society embraced Islam in the 15th century and adopted Muhammadan marriage law). The most common type of Hindu marriage occurs in terms of the purchase of a girl from her parents, replacing a more rudimentary exchange of gifts between the bride and groom's families (Winstedt, 1961:46). Pre-modern society in Southeast Asia attitude towards sexual relationship before embracing Islam also offer different ways of looking at the relationship between woman and men. According to Anthony Reid (1988: 153), premarital sexual interactions in Southeast Asia were viewed leniently, and the expectation of virginity at marriage did not apply to either partner. In the event of a pregnancy, it was customary for couples to wed, reducing the occurrence of illegitimate births. The fidelity and devotion of couples in Southeast Asia were unexpected to Europeans, who did not prioritize mutual affection in their expectations of marriage (Stone, 1983). In contrast, the relatively simple process of divorce in Southeast Asia motivated husbands and wives to work towards maintaining harmonious marriages (Cameron, 1865: 131).

2.1 Division of Labor in Family

One way to understand modern family institutions is by analyzing their division of labor in terms of the changing roles over time. At its most basic, the sexual division of work is the distribution of specific kinds of work to groups of individuals. It is a social framework wherein this distribution puts a limitation on the more active participation of certain groups (Connell, 2013:99). Connell argues that sexual division happened in a workplace where men and women were trained differently to suit the different job specs and thus becomes a mechanism for discrimination in the workplace. Connell also stressed "the political economy of masculinity" when she quotes Ann Curhoys arguments on the structural premise of feminism is the childcare issue, because children are the foundation of the

sexual division of labor within a household. Ann Curthoys astutely notes that childcare is not solely a concern for women; it is also a concern for men. The belief that caring for young children is an unsuitable occupation for males is deeply ingrained (Connell, 2013: 106). This “hegemonic masculinity” is the whole thesis in her book “Gender and Power” (1987) which became an influential book in the sociological study of gender. Obviously differential sexual reproductive characteristics between men and women provide a mutual reliance and mutually responsibilities in the establishment of families and raising of children but the challenge for researchers is to differentiate between variations in responsibilities that are adaptations to biological variances such as birthing and breastfeeding, and those that are influenced by patriarchal structures (Huber, 2008).

In terms of the division of labor within Malay society, the study by Richard Winstedt offers an interesting account of how both sexes understand their roles. Winstedt in his book records significant details about Malay society in the early 20th century. A Malay lady: he argues, fulfils several domestic responsibilities such as housework, cooking, sewing, and caring for her children. Not only involved in the childcare, but the Malay lady also acted as a provider for the family by cultivating rice and harvesting it. In certain circumstances, she also possesses the skill of weaving. She has the power to choose either work in the home garden or engage in angling. If there is alluvial mining nearby, she is free to choose to engage in panning for tin and gold, or she can work as a rubber tapper on her property or as an employee on a plantation. Men, on the other hand, are responsible for performing labor-intensive tasks and solely in the position of breadwinner for the family. They cultivate the rice fields, construct houses and fences, build boats, practice blacksmithing and engage in sea fishing (Winstedt, 1961:50).

Another study by Hirschman argues that there are corresponding few studies on household division in traditional Malay societies (2016:39). But the discussed significant findings offered by Raymond Firth (1966) and Rosemary Firth (1966) on their ethnography studies conducted in Kelantan’s fishing village. Raymond Firth argues that one prominent element of peasant life in Kelantan is the significant freedom that women have, particularly in economic affairs. Not only do they exert a noteworthy impact on the management of family finances, often serving as financial intermediaries for their spouses, but women often participate in separate business ventures that contribute to the family's cash reserves (1966:80).

Another interesting study on the division of labor suggests that the role of women is primarily focused on family matters rather than self-fulfilment, which means that their family is always prioritised when confronted with the decision to choose between career and family. The research conducted in 2008 shows that, Malaysian women are in a predicament, as they are torn between the contemporary obstacles of life and their cultural heritage. Although a significant number of them are currently employed, they are still expected to be responsible for the family and to uphold the traditional perception of a woman (Kalthom, Noor & Wook, 2008: 454). This shows that the role of women hasn’t changed much since the last observation by Winstedt in the early 20th century.

2.2 Advertising and Culture

Advertising acts as a social institution that operates within society in modern times, and it plays a dominant force in economic activities. However, what makes it so unique is the fact that it operates at the junction of the economic and cultural domains (Leiss, W., Kline, S., Jhally, S., & Botterill, J. 2018: 28). Its relations with two important domains in social spheres make it so important in shaping society’s outlook. Anthropologists primarily perceive culture as a system of symbols, namely symbols such as language that are utilized to communicate meaning in social contexts. Consumer advertising frequently links items with symbols that represent ideals, group identity, prestige, position, power, and accomplishment and the perception of a product is influenced by its association with other factors (O’Shaughnessy, & O’Shaughnessy, 2003:57).

Therefore, they believe that the best ways to understand advertising are as a kind of social communication concerning material culture, as an organisation that coordinates and negotiates the market economy and culture, and as a cultural resource that people use for a variety of purposes, many of which may not even be related to buying the product that is advertised alone (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill, 2018: 29).

Portraying relationships within the family in advertisements has been one of the popular appeals in constructing the Malaysian perception of how an ‘ideal’ family should function. Family is one of the themes used by advertisers as an appeal in their advertising content. Asian traits that favor elements such as bonding with the family and showcasing Asian values are very dear and close to the Asian experiences. Malaysian advertising industry according to www.asa.org.my must adhere to Malaysian advertising standards. It is clearly stated in article 1.2 “advertisement must project the Malaysian culture and identity, reflect the multi-racial character of the

population and advocate the philosophy of “RUKUN NEGARA”. (Advertising Standard Malaysia: 14). This statement clearly explains that the advertisement of this country must adhere to the Malaysia racial harmony thus didn’t went against the traditional values of the society and reflected the philosophy of “RUKUN NEGARA” where Islamic outlook is strongly emphasized. Undoubtedly, Islam has been the main catalyst for profound social change throughout history among the Malay community. Although the extent of transformative changes differed among different social groups, the overwhelming identification of Malays in Malaysia with Islam highlights the essential role of Islam in Malay society (Kling, 1995:45).

2.3 Theoretical framework

Connell offers an interesting discussion on gender roles by addressing masculinity as a main trait of Western capitalist society. In her book *Gender and Power* (1987) Connell provides a theoretical framework for understanding gender order within society. Connell talks about three things—labor, power, and cathexis—that work together to make up a society's gender order. These are the patterns of power relationships between men and women that are common in society. Gender-based labor includes the division of work between men and women in the home (like housework and childcare) and in the workplace (like job segregation and unfair pay). In institutions, the military, the home, and the state, power works through social relationships like authority, violence, and ideology. In terms of cathexis, is the study of how close, emotional, and human relationships work, like marriage, sexuality, and raising children (Giddens, 2006: 610).

Her way of thinking has had a big impact on sociology because she combines the ideas of patriarchy and manhood into one big theory about how men and women relate to each other. Connell is interested in how men's social power makes and keeps gender imbalances going. Patriarchal power still shapes how men and women interact in Western capitalist society. Different kinds of manhood and femininity are based on one main idea: men are better than women. This idea applies to respectful individuals and groups (Giddens, 2006: 609-610). Though Connell is delighted that men dominated society by her concept of hegemonic masculinity, she argues that the continuous change within the society such as the threat of the gay movement, women’s rights and anti-sexist attitudes weaken the traditional understanding of hegemonic masculinity as well as that the rising of a new social role as a “househusband” (Giddens,2006: 612). This framework will be employed to understand the current state of Malay societies. While this research does not aim to solve the disputes, it will significantly demonstrate that gender and power, if any, work in Malay society.

3. Methodology

This research focuses on the characteristics of the modern Malay family in advertisements. Random advertisements are analyzed to understand how the ideas of modern families were incorporated and implemented into the advertisement content. Random sampling was taken from YouTube by using the keywords “Malaysia advertisement” where twenty (20) advertisements were observed and analyzed. This advertisement comes from many categories, but we only focus on the advertisement that uses family institutions as their subject. The advertisement usually features a nucleus family or extended family and must be from the year 2016 until 2024 only. Less than ten years span is suitable to illustrate the current understanding of Malay modern family institution. Advertisements were randomly chosen but mostly coming from famous brands in Malaysia including Nestle, Milo, Pizza Hut, Adabi, Malaysian Airlines (MAS), Kentucky Fried Chicken, Darlie, Maggi, Daia, Ribena, Yakult and many more. List of the sampling is presented in Table 1. This study will employ content analysis to analyze elements of gender portrayal within family institutions. Among aspects analyzed include (1) Division of labor, (2) Cathexis and (3) Power, which is based on Connell’s study of *Gender and Power*. Among categories that we used to analyzed division of labor, cathexis and power are: (1) domestic responsibilities, (2) childcare, (3) occupational segregation, (4) unequal pay, (5) the ideal role of wife/husband, (6) authorities and (7) ideologies.

Table 1: *Malaysian Advertisement Sampling*

| No | Year | Brand | Title |
|----|------|-------|---|
| 1. | 2024 | KFC | Camni Memang Sedap hingga menjilat Jari |

| | | | |
|-----|------|------------------------|---|
| 2. | 2023 | KWSP | Bahulu Si Balu |
| 3. | 2022 | Adabi | Kari Buka Tingkap Kari Adabi Berwajah Baharu |
| 4. | 2023 | Milo | Mulakan Pagi Si Juara Dengan Secawan Keباikan Milo |
| 5. | 2022 | Yakult | Usus Mantap, Kuat Lagi Imuniti |
| 6. | 2022 | Ribena | Iftar Tetap Ria Bersama Ribena |
| 7. | 2024 | Maggie | Maggie Sah Nostalgia Famili |
| 8. | 2022 | Maggie | Maggie Hari Ceria Seimbang |
| 9. | 2018 | TNB | TNB Memang Epik Fantastik |
| 10. | 2022 | MAS | This is Malaysian Hospitality |
| 11. | 2023 | Milo | Masa Untuk Bertenaga, Jom Minum MILO |
| 12. | 2021 | Milo | Milo Tetap disisi Walau Berganti Generasi |
| 13. | 2017 | Pizza Hut | Pizza Hut 35 years |
| 14. | 2018 | Nestle Koko Kruch | Nestle Koko Wake up to Happiness |
| 15. | 2017 | KFC | KFC Bucket Berbaloi, Big on Variety and Bigger on Value |
| 16. | 2016 | Malaysia Airline (MAS) | Boleh Adik Ikut |
| 17. | 2020 | Maggie | Mi Maggie Sajian Seimbang Puan Sue |
| 18. | 2023 | Daia | Daia Hijab Segar untuk Hijab, Segar untuk Keluarga |
| 19. | 2020 | Maggie | Maggie Sah Nostalgia |
| 20. | 2024 | Darlie | Closer with a Smile |

4. Finding and Analysis

The findings on advertisement aspects, categories, characteristics and frequency as illustrated in Table 2. Some advertisements exhibit more than one trait, and all traits were collected and analyzed. The result of the analysis is stated as follows.

Table 2 Characteristics of gender order in advertisement in Malaysia using Connell's theory of Gender and Power.

| Aspects | Categories | Characteristic | Frequency |
|--------------------------|--|---|-----------|
| Division of labor | Domestic responsibilities | Women are more dominance in household chores compared to men | 14 |
| | | Men appear to help women with household chores | 0 |
| | Childcare | Advertisement represents cooperation between wife and husband in caring for their children. | 5 |
| | Occupational Segregation | Both men and women work in the similar field. | 2 |
| | | Mostly working in office environment. | |
| | Unequal pay | Women getting lesser than the men. | 2 |
| | | Women getting higher salary than the men | 0 |
| | Men always portrayed as a breadwinner. | 6 | |
| Cathexis | Ideal Role of Wives | Beautiful, loving, respectful, understanding, supportive, hardworking. | 11 |
| | Ideal Role of Husbands | Understanding, provider, cooperates with wife. | 3 |
| Power | Authority | Government exercise on hegemonic masculinity by imposing LGBTQ+ ban on the ads. | All ads |
| | | Power exercised in the family where children need to ask permission from father and mother (in hierarchical order father comes first) or wife must ask husband's permission or elderly members (men) were given respect and priorities. | 2 |
| | Ideologies | Malay Muslim majority outlook ban the LGBTQ+ ideologies thus shaping the dominating opinion in the country. | All ads |

4.1 Division of Labor

It is interesting enough to note that almost all advertisements, if not all, did adhere to the patriarchal order. It's surprising to note that most of the advertisements showcase an unequal division of labor between the genders particularly in domestic responsibilities. In terms of occupational segregation, significant numbers of ads represent women in a workplace together with men. However, the stereotyping of the office environment in advertisements surely makes it hard to identify the division of labor between men and women in terms of hierarchical order in the workplace. Household advertisement on the other hand still maintains the traditional division of labor explicitly when women were expected to be homemakers while men play a conventional role as breadwinners. Advertisements like Milo, for instance, maintain the role of women as housewives and if she has any role in economics within a family, she will become the second in command or only the supporter of the family. Another household advertisement like Maggie, also maintains the patriarchal order when all advertisements analyzed in this study portrayed only women involved in household chores. Division of labor in terms of childcare shows less patriarchal order when five (5) advertisements out of twenty (20) ads so far showcasing men also take

part in childcare duties which traditionally is associated with women. Nevertheless, the control of men in the division of labor is clearly above women and this characteristic persists in many Malaysian advertisements.

The role of women in economic aspects within family institutions is quite interesting to note because women working and doing small business to support family seems like a normal phenomenon in Malay society. It is normal to see women also working to support the family and at the same time maintaining their traditional role as homemakers. In terms of domestic labor, interesting enough to note that none of the advertisements showcasing men involves in helping women with household chores such as cooking or cleaning thus supporting Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. Men have more control in the division of labor within the family while women must adhere to the traditional roles and at the same time must work or be involved in economic activity to support the family. Outside of family institutions, men also display higher salaries than women or have higher rankings in their workplaces. None of the ads showcases women having higher status or salary than men thus displaying that there slightly exists the characteristic of unequal pay between genders. Nevertheless, there is positivity concerning occupational segregation when in advertisements men and women are portrayed as having an equality of job opportunity. Both genders can be seen working in an office setting with no explicit occupational segregation it is observable.

4.2 Cathexis

Cathexis in the theory of Gender and Power can be perceived as the societal standards and emotional ties that define how individuals should display their sexuality and conform to established gender roles (Connell, 2013: 112). Cathexis can be derived from the analyzed advertisement by categorizing it into the ideal portrayal of husband/father and wife/mother within family institutions. The exemplary husband in Malay society possesses a few qualities such as understanding, cooperation with the wife and being a provider for the family. The house in almost every advertisement needs to be spacious and modern, thus indicating the location should be in the urban cities with beautiful gardens and surrounded by necessities, which is the standard representation of what should constitute an "ideal" husband as a provider. In terms of cooperations with the wife, one of the advertisements by Darlie's Toothpaste represents the husband taking care of the kids while her wife helps the neighbor. Another advertisement by Pizza Hut also constitutes the same idea that the husband cooperates with his wife in taking care of the children. This pattern appears repeatedly throughout the advertisement analyzed when five (5) of the commercials represent the same characteristics.

4.3 Respectful, supportive and beautiful

This goes with what Connell coined as "emphasized femininity" where she argues the important aspect that complements hegemonic masculinity that existed in older women in the forms of motherhood and sexual receptivity among younger women (Giddens, 2006: 611). Almost all advertisements (involve individuals having a role as mothers) exhibit motherly traits such as loving towards their children and hard work both in their workplace and home. Household advertisements such as Maggi, Milo, Nestle and Daia explicitly represented "love" by associating their product with the role of mother in choosing the best product for their family. In terms of supportive and understanding, one advertisement from Milo shows that the wife saves up some money to help her husband set up a new business. This advertisement shows that the wife should pose "understanding" towards the husband by serving him economically when the other half can't provide enough necessities for the family. While the husband opens a small food stall, the wife again helps in cooking and selling the food. While the economic issues are oriented towards the husband, the wife is expected to be an account holder for the family and always ready to help the husband, even if the wife doesn't have a stable job. Another important characteristic of an ideal wife is that she needs to be beautiful and presentable. Almost all advertisements represent beautiful women (when we say beautiful, what we mean is physically in good shape – hair, skin and face are taken care of, wearing a makeup, dress decently) and maintain their beauty even while doing house chores. Husbands are also portrayed in good shape especially when they have a role as an executive at the offices; but most ads represent the husband / father in its natural setting which is the notion of "handsome" or "in a good shape" doesn't significantly play part as important characteristics demanded in the advertisement.

4.4 Power

The power relations between genders somehow exist within one of the advertisements by Malaysia Airlines. This ad shows the hierarchy of gender power when the kid asks her father whether her cat could be taken together when the family is using an airplane to go back to their hometown for the Eid celebration. Though she also asked

her mother multiple times on the same topic, the approach is rather different when the father is seen as a more serious and stable entity compared to her mother when she can beg her mother with her kiddish remarks. Malaysian Authority's control over LGBTQ+ issues also mark the maintaining of the ideas of what constituted "family" in Malay society. More than 60% of the Malaysian population is Malay Muslim which formed the dominant opinion of what the values within family institutions should be. Though Chinese and Indians make up another 30% of the Malaysian population, our brief observation of advertisements featuring Chinese and Indian families also adheres to traditional Asian values. There are no issues of family exercising their power over their children. Milk formula advertisement particularly seems to engage with this approach dominantly by showcasing parents involved in supporting their children's dreams in the future instead of exercising their power in choosing what path should be taken by the children. There is also no trace of the husband exercising his power over his wife both physically and psychologically since all advertisement shows cooperation between both gender of what constitutes "ideal family" in Malay outlook.

5. Conclusion

From a random twenty (20) advertisements analysis, it is interesting to note that the modern Malay families generally still adhere to the traditional patriarchal order, especially on the division of labor particularly within a nucleus family. However, there is a significant number of advertisements emphasizing equality between genders, especially in a type of job across genders. The "resistance femininity" which constitutes groups such as feminists and lesbians also absent from the advertisement, proving that modern ideas of defining gender, or particularly the LGBTQ+ movement if any, didn't have any significant impact in weakening the patriarchal order of Southeast Asian society. However, this outlook might change when we analyze another form of media content such as drama, film or animation due to the facts that the specific content target specific market segment. Whether this representation mirrors the society's situation or advertising acts as a social agent in molding society's expectations/societal inspirations, this also comes into question and needs further explanation. Regardless of how deep the impact of advertising as a social institution internalized within the society if we agree with the latter, the patriarchal order in Malay society especially in the division of labor needs to be taken seriously because the imbalance demanded role of women in the society suggests. While both genders are involved in working outside of the home, the division of labor carried by the women is much greater than men to some extent. The significant notion in ads that women should act as a "support" system in the family especially in terms of the economy while at the same time maintaining their traditional role at home is rather burdensome even though it is perceived as a natural phenomenon in Malay society.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

*The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** N.S.M.I., I.M.H.A. and S.M.S.M.; **data collection:** N.S.M.I., I.M.H.A. and S.M.S.M.; **analysis and interpretation of results:** N.S.M.I., I.M.H.A. and S.M.S.M.; **draft manuscript preparation:** N.S.M.I., I.M.H.A. and S.M.S.M. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

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