

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter deals with the description of the problem, the aims and significance of the study, the rationale for the selected topic and the limitations of the study. It is divided into:

- 1.1 Background
- 1.2 Aims of the study
- 1.3 Significance of the study
- 1.4 Rationale of the study
- 1.5 Limitations of the study
- 1.6 Conclusion

1.1 Background

Advertisements are one of the things that had been in existence in ancient times itself. "In Roman times, there were advertisements offering rewards for runaway slaves and advertisements for gladiatorial shows." (Davis, 1963). Even the old town-crier was an advertiser, though he had made use of the oral method of making known (Hall, 1921). In this modern world, there is a variety of

advertisements. There is 'trade' advertising, which is addressed to the retailers by the manufacturer and 'retail' advertising, from the retailer to the potential customer. Some advertisements do not have any commercial intention and these are the ones that are initiated by the government departments and non-profit bodies such as charities. However most common of all the advertisements is the 'commercial consumer advertising' (Leech, 1986 p.25). This is directed towards a mass audience with the aim of promoting sales of a commercial product or service. This kind of advertisement requires the most money, professional skill and advertising space. In fact, commercial consumer advertising does play a significant role within the modern economic organisation.

In this new era, manufacturers have to vie with each other to produce distinctive new products or improve existing ones. After that, they have to distribute their products to the consumers. In other words, they have to get the product or service placed in positions where the people will use the product or service to their advantage. They also have to create a situation where there is a favourable reception for the product or service (Hall, 1921). That is where commercial consumer advertising is significant.

Such advertising makes the product known and keeps reminding the consumer of the product or service so that the consumer may purchase it when the time comes. Hence, we have a situation where the advertisements can be noticed, seen or heard about everywhere. "They are far too numerous to be ignored and far too irresistible not to make some mark on our thoughts and actions" (Gill, 1954).

Thus, advertisements do not operate in a vacuum. (Kang, 1997). They constitute certain attitudes. They have their own meanings in the cultural group, where the members share sets of concepts and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, in roughly similar ways (Hall, 1921). That explains why an advertisement of Nivea Body Lotion is different when it appears in England and Malaysia. In the advertisement meant for British consumers, the advertisement has a model who is seen covering her semi-nude body with both her arms. In the case of the advertisement meant for Malaysian consumers, the model is fully-clothed. The caption also differs. In the advertisement meant for the British consumers, the product is supposed to result in “smoother, softer skin”. However, in the advertisement meant for the Malaysian consumers, the product has the effect of restoring “soft, youthful radiance.” So it appears that while British consumers equate good complexion and skin as being soft and smooth, Malaysian consumers equate them to youthfulness.

Advertisers, therefore make use of stereotypes in a society to get their messages across. Consequently, this has resulted in the language of advertisements to come under heavy scrutiny by many researchers who are interested, among other aspects, in the stereotypes that are exploited in advertisements.

One of the most controversial and popular stereotypes which has been studied is sex stereotype. For example, in Kang’s study (1997), she looked into the portrayal of women in magazine advertisements and concluded that stereotypical

images of women's images in advertisements continue to exist. Posavac et. al. (1998) acknowledged that advertisements hold the stereotypical view that female attractiveness lay in extreme thinness and they studied the effects of this portrayal on young women's concern with their body weight. Hurtz and Durking (1997) concluded that Australia's radio commercials presented men and women differently and these differences reflected traditional gender role stereotypes. Advertisements, therefore, do employ stereotypes to get their connotations across and they do so through an array of strategies. These strategies can be through graphics or deviant spellings or even through exploitation of connotations.

1.2 Aims of the study

In Malaysia, there are common stereotypes which the local advertisers may be inadvertently conforming to. These stereotypes may be present in many of the advertisements meant for the local audience.

In facial product and slimming advertisements, there may be some common social stereotypes concerning the ideal Malaysian complexion and figure or body weight. The advertisers of these products or services hope, that by using certain connotative language in their advertisements, they will attract readers who want to conform to the ideals. Thus, the advertisements may be based on shared stereotypes which may not have been adequately studied by local researchers in institutions of higher learning. So the focus of this study will be the connotative

language used in the printed facial and slimming advertisements, which may be adhering to common stereotypes of the ideal Malaysian complexion and figure or body weight.

This study entails finding answers to the following questions :

- (1) Do certain words have positive connotations of a particular complexion and figure or body weight?
- (2) Do certain words have negative connotation of a particular complexion and figure or body weight?
- (3) If such connotations do exist, do the advertisements carry a biased or prejudicial view against a particular complexion or figure or body weight?

1.3 Significance of the study

There have been many international studies done on advertisements that usually focus on the components that make up the advertisements. Thus, studies have been done on the graphics, music or the people who created the advertisements as well as on the language of advertisements. In Malaysia, there have been a few studies done in Bahasa Malaysia on the language of advertisements. However,

these studies focussed more on the language patterns rather than on the stereotypes that exist in the advertisements.

Asmah's (1984) study on advertisements looked at the use of rhetorical techniques in the Malay advertisements. Nik Safiah (1983) looked at the language of advertisements, as one of the aspects in the development of the Malay language. Noor Baithi (1988) explored the use of language in advertisements. Khamis (1993) study, which unlike the rest, was written in English, examined the language of television advertisements in Malaysia. His focus was on the linguistic features of advertisements and his data included both English and Bahasa Malaysia advertisements.

All the above studies looked at only the linguistic features of the advertisements and none focussed on the connotative language reflecting the stereotypes that exist in advertisements. So it is hoped that the findings of this study will reveal to all women some of the stereotypes that exist in the language of advertisements in two leading women's magazines. These magazines are largely read by women, especially middle-class women and, to an extent, men as well. The magazines are locally published – *Her World* and *Female*. Since this is a useful exploratory study on the use of connotative language in advertisements, it would also be useful to linguists and language researchers in terms of research methodology and selection of data.

So by exploring some of the stereotypes that exist in the advertisements that appear in these magazines, it is hoped that the average Malaysian reader will become more aware of such stereotypes that are subtly conveyed to them. This awareness would hopefully enable them to become more critical consumers in judging such advertisements.

Hence, the researcher hopes that this study will make both the linguist and the consumer more aware of the subtle prejudices that are depicted in the language of advertisements in these local magazines.

1.4 Rationale of the study

Although internationally and locally there have been academic studies done on print advertisements, there is still inadequate research on the advertising strategies of individual products and services. Thus stereotypes that exist in individual products or service advertisements are not highlighted in most studies.

Facial product advertisements frequently appear in monthly women's magazines. Facial product advertisements do make up a high percentage of the total number of advertisements that appear in the magazines. Yet, there has been no research done on the language of facial product advertisements in the local magazines and on the stereotypes that may be inherent in them. Although slimming advertisements do not make up a high percentage of total advertisements, both of

these types of advertisements need to be studied together so that a more complete picture of the so-called ideal Malaysian beauty stereotype can be revealed.

Reports and letters that have appeared in the local newspapers have prompted interest in such research. Some individuals have accused the foreign media, namely the Western media of being biased against Asian models or beauty contestants. The Western media has often been criticized and accused of being reluctant to accept or appreciate the Asian models or beauties because of their own stereotypical concept of beauty. An example of such an accusation was made by Yvonne Teoh, mother of Malaysian beauty, Lina Teoh. She had voiced her displeasure at the Australian media. She said that when Lina Teoh visited modelling agencies in Australia, she was told to "lose weight and have her eyes operated on" (The Star, 4 December, 1998 :21). Her remarks led to a reply from an Australian model (The Star, 8 December, 1998 : 21) who defended Australian modelling agencies. In her reply, she said that Lina Teoh was 1.72 cm tall and therefore was below the minimum height for models in Australia. She also went on to add that Lina Teoh and her mother "should look at the local biased industry before criticizing others." This was because she said : "I see many extremely beautiful dark-skinned women in the streets in Kuala Lumpur. Yet I do not see dark-skinned models in Malaysian magazines unless she is advertising a skin lightening product. The "fair and lovely" culture predominates the Malaysian media."

In another letter to the press, a local Malay parent voiced similar displeasure at the stereotypes held by certain quarters of society. Being married to an African, her children have inherited both the parents' physical characteristics. Thus, they look different from the average Malaysian Malay children. This has led them and her husband as well, to be faced with unkind or "ugliest" comments about their origin and skin colour. She remarked: "some Asians seem to think that being beautiful, intelligent and successful is being "white", judging from the numerous whitening lotions and creams advertised of late. (New Straits Times, 7 April, 1999 : 13).

Moreover, an article by ISIS International Manila (1999) on the web claimed that "women who do not fit the prevailing stereotypes of fair-skinned, slim, young and heterosexual are not given much attention in the media" (ISIS, 1999).

Having come across these, the researcher is interested to find out whether these stereotypes are depicted in the advertisements under study. Should the findings of the study show that these stereotypes do exist, then we should first be more critical of our own media and ourselves before condemning the foreign media of being biased or prejudiced.

A recent survey done by Avon Products Inc. further contributed to the interest to carry out this study. The survey, which was done on a global scale and which included Malaysian women's views, looked into women's perception of beauty.

Many of the respondents were reported to have “placed more importance on inner beauty than external beauty.” The survey showed that the respondents valued “having self – confidence (59%) and feeling valued and respected (56%) as the most important factors for feeling good about themselves. The survey also included a question on the kind of products that the women could not live without. Among the top three products were lipstick (67%), moisturizer (49%), cleanser (38%) and fragrance (37%). (New Straits Times, Life and Times, 15 March , 1999: 1).

If the above survey results are true, the findings of this study hopes to enlighten women in Malaysia to the subtle prejudices that the local advertisers are using in their advertisements to promote their products. This is because the findings of the Avon survey and the stereotypes that the advertisers seem to depict in their advertisements are in absolute contradiction.

In addition, it is hoped that the findings of this study will stimulate further research into stereotypes inherent in advertisements so that more and more people are conscious of how advertisements exploit stereotypes. The constant bombardment of advertisements which exploit stereotypes can even lead to people being discontented with what they are or what they have. Hence, research of this nature can hopefully create awareness of biases and lead to a more enlightened and discriminatory consumer population.

1.5 Limitations of the study

This study is limited to only two locally published women's magazines. However there are several other women's magazines which are read by Malaysians. Some are locally published, some are published abroad but adapted to the local context or solely published abroad. Hence, the findings of this study may need further support from research done on advertisements from other women's magazines besides the two selected by the researcher.

Malaysia is a multi-lingual society. Local magazines are published in Bahasa Malaysia, Tamil and Mandarin besides English. In fact, Bahasa Malaysia is the national language and the medium of instruction in schools and the language is used in the government sector. It can also be said to be the lingua-franca language. So the other shortcoming of this study is that it does not cover magazines published in the other languages to see whether the same kind of stereotypes exist in these magazines as well. Thus, it is not possible to draw the conclusion that such stereotypes that may exist in the English advertisements do exist in the other magazines written in other languages.

1.6 Conclusion

This study aims to analyze the language of facial products and slimming advertisements so as to uncover the stereotypes that are depicted. It is hoped that the findings of this study will benefit linguists and researchers, who may be

interested in the study of advertisements of individual products. In addition, this study aims to make the average Malaysian more aware of the stereotypes that exist in the society and take a more critical view of such advertisements. It is hoped other researchers will study the stereotypes in advertisements both in the print as well as the electronic media. In addition it is hoped that studies such as these will enable the people of Malaysia in general to be more open-minded and to realise that certain stereotypes held can bring about unhappiness and emotional dissatisfaction to those who are negatively affected by the stereotypes.

In general, it is hoped that the study will make a contribution not only linguistically but also socially.