

UNIVERSITI MALAYA

ORIGINAL LITERARY WORK DECLARATION

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Name of Degree: **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

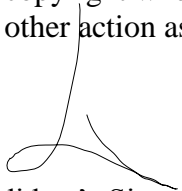
Title of ~~Project Paper/Research Report/Dissertation/Thesis~~ (“this Work”):

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE IDEAL FEMALE BODY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MALAYSIAN SLIMMING ADVERTISEMENTS**

Field of Study: **CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how slimming advertisements work to frame slimness as the ideal female beauty. To investigate this issue, this study undertakes to analyze two sources of data: slimming advertisements (100 print advertisements altogether) and interviews (40 sets of transcription). The following research questions guide the development of this investigation: 1) How is the ideal female body *textually* constructed in the selected slimming advertisements? 2) How is the ideal female body *visually* constructed in the selected slimming advertisements? 3) In what ways are women influenced by the ideology of the ideal female body?

Fairclough's (1995a) three-dimensional conception of discourse is used to see the relationship between three levels of a particular communicative event: *discourse-as-text*, *discourse-as-discursive practice* and *discourse-as-social practice*. This analytical framework helps in answering the research questions. The first level deals with *discourse-as-text*. The thesis examines how multimodal resources are used in slimming advertisements to construct the ideal female body through language and visuals. The linguistic analysis focuses on the lexical choices which are related to the construction of ideal female body. As for the visual analysis, the images related to the ideal female body are examined using the analytical framework of visual social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). The second level deals with *discourse-as-discursive practice*. Here the study deals with the consumption of text in terms of how the respondents are influenced by the ideology of the ideal female body as portrayed in the slimming advertisements. Finally, the level of *discourse-as-sociocultural practice* is discussed based on the findings in all the three research questions. The ways the slimming advertisements promote the ideology of the ideal female body are seen in the light of sociocultural practices that play the key roles in maintaining, disseminating and propagating the ideology behind the ideal female body.

The findings of this study demonstrate that these advertisements offer proof of how slimness is a part of a sociocultural system of representation where female beauty is limited to images of women that focus on the slim ideal. It is part of a sociocultural system in which the ideal female beauty is constructed as a young, slender and shapely body. It is also consolidated into a system of belief that objectifies women and dictates how women should look or not look like. Women are expected to measure up to the social expectations of how they should look like. This is done by constructing, promoting and sustaining false beauty needs. This beauty ideology and belief system, as seen in the interviews, has been internalized by most of the Malaysian women.

This study, therefore, is timely and significant as it shows how this ideal female body is a social construction. By examining the ideal female body image from the linguistic and visual social semiotics lens as well as supported with interview data, the integration of different tools of enquiry provides insights into the possible causes leading to body dysmorphic disorders. It is hoped that by highlighting this issue, women will learn not be too gullible to fall prey easily to the 'promises' of the slimming products and services. This can help Malaysian women to be aware of these false advertising claims and to challenge the prevailing notions of slimness and beauty. This research also hopes to create awareness and a constructive 'suspicion' of all processes of text interpretation, in the particular context, the slimming advertisements.

## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menyiasat bagaimana iklan-iklan pelangsingan badan menetapkan tubuh yang langsing sebagai ideal kecantikan wanita. Untuk mencapai tujuan ini, analisis dijalankan ke atas dua sumber data: iklan-iklan pelangsingan badan (100 iklan bercetak) dan temuduga (40 transkripsi). Tiga persoalan kajian yang berikut membantu menetapkan hala tuju penyiasatan: 1) Bagaimanakah tubuh badan wanita yang ideal dikonstruksi secara *tekstual* dalam iklan-iklan terpilih? 2) Bagaimanakah tubuh badan wanita yang ideal dikonstruksi secara *visual* dalam iklan-iklan terpilih? 3) Dari segi manakah golongan wanita dipengaruhi oleh ideologi tubuh badan wanita yang ideal?

Rangka kerja tiga dimensi Fairclough (1995a) digunakan untuk menganalisis data bagi tujuan kajian ini. Rangka kerja ini menyiasat hubungan antara tiga aspek komunikasi: “*discourse-as-text*”, “*discourse-as-discursive practice*” dan “*discourse-as-social practice*”. Rangka kerja ini membantu dalam menjawab tiga persoalan kajian tersebut. Soalan penyelidikan pertama dan kedua meneliti tahap yang pertama: “*discourse-as-text*”. Ia mengkaji kaedah-kaedah yang digunakan dalam iklan pelangsingan badan, iaitu menerusi mod linguistik dan visual. Bagi aspek linguistik, analisis ditumpukan kepada pilihan leksikal dalam menggambarkan tubuh wanita yang ideal. Bagi aspek visual pula, rangka kerja analisis semiotik visual sosial (Kress dan van Leeuwen, 1996) digunakan untuk menganalisa penampilan imej-imej tubuh wanita yang ideal. Soalan penyelidikan ketiga “*discourse-as-discursive practice*” meneliti dari segi manakah ideologi tubuh badan wanita yang ideal dalam iklan-iklan pelangsingan badan telah mempengaruhi responden-responden tersebut. Akhir sekali, tahap ketiga “*discourse-as-social practice*” dibincangkan berdasarkan penemuan menerusi ketiga-tiga soalan penyelidikan. Cara-cara iklan pelangsing badan menggalakkan wanita untuk memiliki tubuh badan langsing yang ideal diperlihatkan sebagai satu amalan sosial yang memainkan peranan utama dalam mengekalkan dan menyebarkan ideologi badan wanita yang ideal.

Hasil kajian ini mengutarakan pandangan bahawa iklan-iklan ini adalah bukti bagaimana kelangsingan merupakan sebahagian daripada sistem sosio-budaya di mana kecantikan wanita didefinisikan menerusi ciri-ciri kewanitaan yang terhad. Ia adalah sebahagian daripada sistem sosio-budaya di mana kewanitaan dan wanita yang ideal adalah seperti berikut: muda, berbadan langsing dan menawan. Sejurus itu, ia telah menjadi seperkara yang lumrah untuk menentukan bagaimana wanita harus berdandan dan mempamerkan diri. Dalam pada itu, wanita diumpamakan sebagai ‘objek’. Seperkara ini dilakukan dan disokong oleh budaya kini melalui promosi keperluan badan yang ideal. Penghayatan terhadap ideologi sedemikian dapat dilihat menerusi temuramah yang telah dijalankan di kalangan wanita Malaysia.

Oleh itu, kajian ini adalah tepat pada masanya dan penting kerana ia mendedahkan bagaimana badan wanita ideal ini adalah konstruk sosial. Dengan memperincikan imej badan wanita yang ideal dari aspek-aspek linguistik dan semiotik visual sosial serta disokong oleh data temuduga, integrasi instrument-instrumen penyelidikan yang berbeza membantu dalam siasatan atas sebab-sebab yang mungkin membawa kepada masalah badan. Adalah diharapkan bahawa dengan mengetengahkan isu ini, wanita akan belajar untuk tidak terlalu mudah terpedaya dengan ‘janji’ produk dan perkhidmatan pelangsingan dalam iklan-iklan tersebut. Ini boleh membantu wanita

Malaysia menyedari tuntutan pengiklanan mungkin palsu dan terlampau idealistik. Kajian ini juga berharap untuk mewujudkan kesedaran dan membina keupayaan penafsiran teks secara kritikal, terutamanya dalam konteks iklan-iklan pelangsing badan.

## **PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS FROM THESE STUDIES**

### **Conference papers presented:**

FLL Postgraduate Research Conference 2009

Crystal Crown Hotel, Petaling Jaya

7-8 December 2009

Title of paper: "Gendered Discourses in Slimming Ads on the 'problem' of being fat"

University of Malaya Discourse and Society Conference 2010

Hilton Hotel, Petaling Jaya

17-19 June 2010

Title of paper: "Interactive Meaning Potentials in Slimming Advertisements"

19<sup>th</sup> Global Asian Media International Conference 2010

Suntec City, Singapore

21-23 June 2010

Title of paper: "Ideological Construction of Femininity in Slimming Advertisements"

4<sup>th</sup> Global Conference: Fear, Horror and Terror Conference

Oriel College, Oxford, UK

11-13 September 2010

Title of paper: "Fear Factors in Malaysian Slimming Advertisements"

### **Papers under review for publication:**

*The Journal of Visual Culture & Gender.*

Interactive Meaning Potentials in Weight-loss Web-advertising: The Female Body in Crisis.

*SEARCH: The Journal of the South East Asia Research Centre for Communication and Humanities.*

Fat Stigmatization in Slimming Advertisements: A Malaysian Context.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank God for providing a fellowship (SLAI Program) to pursue this study. Without which, it is just not possible to have the finance and luxury of time to accomplish this academic pursuit. I continually thank God for the contributions that the following people have made to my life and my academic pursuit. I could not have completed this gruelling undertaking without their personal and professional support. My heartfelt gratitude goes out to:

- To my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Zuraidah Mohd. Don, thank you for your suggestion to include the interview. It provides a space for the Malaysian ladies to have their voices heard. Your observations and challenging remarks steered, shaped and refined the various drafts of each chapter.
- To Wong Ming Yook, Kok Su Mei, Samantha Siau, Sally Anne Dharminder and Charlotte Lau – thanks for reading some of the earlier drafts. Your constructive comments helped to improve my dissertation.
- To family members, friends, fellow doctoral ‘comrades’, Hoong Eng’s cell group members and former BSF, Joshua Home Fellowship members – thank you for offering your prayers, words of encouragement, care and concern.
- To the women who participated in this research, thanks for sharing your views.

Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) once said, “[i]f a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts he shall end in certainties.” This paradox of life describes an academic endeavour such as this. From the start to the end of this study, there has been not a dull moment of constant change. While they are stimulating at times, they can be terribly daunting and overwhelming at other times. For that, I really owe it to the kindred spirit that sees me through thick and thin of this arduous journey.

## DEDICATION

*To my beloved parents,  
**Lau Tiong Tuk & Ling Sui Ing***

*and*

*my youngest brother,  
**Albert Lau Hieng Kuok***