

Problematizing the Problem: Cross-Cultural Analysis of Problems in Advice Articles of Women's Magazines

Kadın Dergilerinde Tavsiye Yazıları

Reem Adib Lulu*

Sharifah Nurul Huda Alkaff**

University Brunei Darussalam

Abstract

In this study, the sex and relationship advice articles in locally-produced English language women's magazines from three different contexts, which are, Malaysia, the US, and two Middle Eastern countries, Egypt and the UAE, were examined to explore the kinds of problems that appear in each context. According to Machin and Van Leeuwen (2003), the problem-solution discourse schema used by several international editions of *Cosmopolitan* is essentially a global one. We aim to investigate if this schema can be applied to home-grown women's magazines as well. Sex and relationship advice articles from six home-grown English language women's magazines (two magazines from each context) were analysed. The findings reveal variations in the definitions and contextualisation of each problem category in the three contexts. However, the overall *aim* of these articles is rather similar. That is, the problems that appear in these magazines are chosen to help women find answers to achieve certain life goals such as independence and confidence in all three contexts.

Keywords: Relationship Advice, Women's Magazines, Cross-cultural Analysis, Empowerment, Machin and Van Leeuwen

Introduction

Women's magazines are distinguished from other media mainly because they are directed specifically towards women and are read primarily by women (Ceulemans and Fauconnier, 1979, 39). They generally feature articles on fashion, beauty, lifestyle and relationships. Caldas-Coulthard (1996, 252) states that their focus is on "*about being female and the problems of being female*". This statement suggests that being female is automatically considered as problematic and that women's interests are limited to the areas stated above. Yet, Berns (1999, 86-87) states that they have an important role in seeking to capture women's changing roles and responsibilities and providing an interesting perspective on different issues related to women in greater detail than do other types of mass media.

In the literature of studies on women's magazines, the vast majority of research has been conducted on either advertisements (Brown and Knight 2015; Zhao and Zhu 2015) or on front covers (Conlin and Bissell 2014; Crusmac 2013), in order to investigate the representation of women or their gender roles. Fewer

Çankaya University *CUJHSS* (ISSN 1309-6761), December 2022, 16/2:197-214

<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/cankujhss>. DOI: 10.47777/cankujhss.1084879

Submitted: March 8, 2022; Accepted: October 28, 2022. © 2022 authors (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

*Dr., Independent Researcher; reemadiblulu@gmail.com; ORCID#: 0000-0002-7737-2465

**Asst. Prof. Dr., University Brunei Darussalam; ORCID#: 0000-0001-6534-1381

studies are found on advice articles, in particular relationship and sex advice columns. These refer to articles found in many women's magazines in sections with headings such as 'Sex and Relationships' or 'Love and Sex'. Morris (2007, 308) states that these columns are often trivialized and treated as insignificant by society in general because they describe something considered to be merely 'girl-talk'; designed for amusement and entertainment, and the problems they represent are often viewed as "*just as much a commodity as the magazines themselves*". However, she believes that they are very important since they include the very serious treatment of issues that focus on the socio-political discourse of the day and on an understanding of the relationship between private and public worlds. She states that in society in general, some problems are unfit for public discussion, thus advice articles regularly deal with 'private' problems in a very public sphere, and, they provide unmediated access to the opinions and intimate lives of ordinary people. As they are dismissed as unimportant and target only women readers, greater freedom is thus, given to their writers to broach awkward subjects (2007, 326).

Among the few studies on this genre are those by Farvid and Braun (2006) and Erjavec (2006) who examine how various magazines construct and uphold commonly-held views of female sexuality in their advice articles. Other scholars investigate the linguistic constructions of advice articles (Lorenset 2012; Conradie 2011) while others explore the dominant themes of advice articles (Gill 2010; Machin and Thornborrow, 2003). All the studies on advice articles cited here are located in a Western context only. There are even fewer studies that offer a cross-cultural comparison of advice columns in women's magazines. We believe that investigating this particular genre in depth in women's magazines can provide valuable insights on the value systems of particular cultures, as constructed by the writers of this genre. In addition, the comparison of this genre in two different Muslim societies (Malaysia and Middle East) can, perhaps, generate a better understanding of the status of women in general and how female sexuality in particular are viewed in these societies.

One of the few cross-cultural studies of this genre is Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003) study. They investigate feature and advice articles on a number of topics including work, relationships, and sexuality in several international editions of *Cosmopolitan*. They find that a 'problem-solution' discourse schema used for all the articles analysed, regardless of the topic. Using this schema, they investigate the kinds of problems and solutions that appear in the magazines. With regard to problems, they find five problem categories that they claim are present in all the editions but are formulated in different ways across cultures. Thus, they state that despite the existence of '*local accents*', the problem-solution discourse schema used by these magazines is a global one shared by all the editions of *Cosmopolitan*. As discourse schemas in general are "*interpretive frameworks... for understanding social practises*", the schema they developed is described as "*a global model for the representation of social practices*" and is viewed as the dominant mode used by women's magazines for constructing reality. Furthermore, Lulu and Alkaff (2019) explore the solutions that advice articles promote to their readers in locally-produced English language women's

magazines in the US, the Middle East, and Malaysia. They find that the socio-cultural and religious beliefs of the three parts of the world studied reflect the types of solutions appearing in the articles.

In this present study, relationship advice articles in six home-grown English language women's magazines from three different countries which are Malaysia, the US, and the Middle East (Egypt and UAE), are examined to explore the kinds of relationship problems that appear in each context. We chose to focus on the problems that appear in these articles as the choice of what is presented as a 'problem' indicates a certain stance by these magazines on what ails women generally. As the articles are written by the magazines' writers rather than solicited from the readers as in a Q&A format, the conception and selection of so-called problems are of interest to us. According to Fullager, Gattuso and Young (2005), women's magazines are extremely influential in the lives of women as they produce collective visuals for women to understand their personal experiences in relation to the stories about other women. Thus, the magazines' choice of issues that are constructed as problems to women need to be examined in greater detail as they have the power to encourage women to reflect more deeply on issues that are deemed as important to these publications. It is noted that problems in these publications are almost always defined as challenges that women may face with the men in their lives in which they have a sexual or emotional connection. Previous studies for example, Gauntlett (2008) and Lulu and Alkaff (2018) have revealed that sex and relationship issues presented in women's magazines are almost exclusively heterosexual in nature, even in societies in which homosexuality is legally and socially sanctioned.

In addition, we aim to investigate if the problem-solution discourse schema of such articles is a global one, as claimed by Machin and Van Leeuwen (2003) or if there are differences which can be attributed to the fact that we are investigating home-grown magazines rather than local editions of international magazines as in the afore-mentioned study. 'Home-grown' magazines are defined as publications that are founded and published by publishing companies in the respective countries with the local staff having total control of editorial policy. Very few studies are conducted on home-grown English language women's magazines in non-Western contexts in particular, thus there is a gap in the literature in this particular area. The gap is even more pronounced when it comes to women's magazines in mainly Muslim societies as current research on Muslim women in general is mainly focused on '*veiling scholarship*' (Hochel 2013).

We believe that analysing home-grown magazines would provide better insights and understanding on the values that they seek to promote in relation to the predominant values or norms of the society they are set in rather than analysing local editions of international magazines. The latter probably reflects the ethos of the international publishing companies more than that of the local society. Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

1. What kind of problems are found in the relationship advice articles of home-grown English language women's magazines in the US, the Middle East and Malaysia?
2. Do the findings in Machin and van Leeuwen's (2003) problem-solution discourse schema apply to the context of home-grown magazines in each respective society?

Background of the magazines

The data for this study were drawn from two home-grown English-language women's magazines from each of the three contexts. Thus, a total of six locally-produced magazines were analysed. We chose to analyse these magazines as we wanted to investigate if the values of these publications reflect local norms (for example, women as nurturers) or if they have adopted a more global outlook on issues facing women, such as gender inequality. As we aim to investigate socio-cultural values and norms and if these are reflected in the texts pertaining to women's problems, we selected the three contexts, that is the US, Malaysia and the Middle East based on our view that these three societies represent varying degrees in terms of attitudes towards gender equality, ranging from mainly liberal (US), fairly conservative (Malaysia) and mainly conservative (Middle East). However, we wish to caution that terms such as 'liberal' and 'conservative' used in this paper do not mean that we believe that one set of values is superior or more enlightened to the other. It is simply a way of expressing differences in values and attitudes towards gender equality, an inevitable fact, perhaps, based on their very different histories and social-cultural milieus.

Hearst magazines, one of the world's largest publishers of magazines, is the publisher for *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*, the two US magazines analysed for this study. The US women's magazines industry is widely seen as the biggest and most influential in the world. They are widely seen as serving as a benchmark in which women's magazines in other societies are assessed, which explains their inclusion in our study. Although the two US magazines selected are transnational magazines with a global readership, we chose to analyse the US editions of these magazines which are produced in the US. Thus, in that sense, they can also be considered as home-grown magazines.

Blu Inc Media, Malaysia's biggest publisher of magazines, is the publisher of *Female* and *Her World*, the two Malaysian women's magazines selected for this study. The target readers for both magazines are urban women who are well-versed in the English language. Magazines in Malaysia are published in the main languages of the country, that is, Malay, English and Mandarin, each targeting a different segment of the multicultural and multilingual society. Wang (2006), in her study that compares Malay and English language women's magazines in Malaysia finds that the content of Malay magazines is generally more conservative as they are targeted towards a mainly Malay-Muslim readership. The readership of the English language magazines, on the other hand, are mainly non-Malays and non-Muslims.

Regarding the third context, we selected *What Women Want* and *Ahlan*, two popular English language women's magazines in Egypt and UAE respectively. The UAE is a centre of publishing and cultural influence in the Middle East due to its political and economic stability. The women's magazines in this region target not only local women in the UAE but also other Middle Eastern and non-Arab women due to the large number of expatriates living there. Egypt, on the other hand, has a long history of women's magazines since the first women's magazine in the Arab World appeared in Egypt in 1892. It also has a strong cultural influence on other countries in the region (Ibrahim 1996). As in Malaysia, most readers of English language women's magazines in the Middle East are expected to be well-educated urban women with a more liberal outlook than the general population. Despite the fact that English language magazines in both contexts are targeting a niche audience that comprise of liberal English-educated women, we believe that these publications can still be seen as reflecting local norms and values to a certain extent mainly due to the fact that they are subjected to various laws and regulations pertaining to publications in both contexts. For example, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 in Malaysia requires all publications to apply for a license that has to be renewed annually. Although online publications are not subjected to this Act, there is, nevertheless, a strong incentive for publications to adhere to the regulations imposed by the authorities.

As not many locally produced English language women's magazines are found in the Middle East, it was necessary to draw upon two countries for our data collection. However, this is justified as we believe most Middle Eastern countries share similar traits in terms of linguistic and cultural elements, as stated by Nydell (2012). She states that despite varying degrees of social control over women in the Arab World, the region, in general, can be described as one in which patriarchal roles, attitudes and values hold supreme.

Methodology

Sixty articles, ten from each magazine, were retrieved from the sex and relationship advice sections of the magazines. Only articles which were at least one page long were selected. Articles on sexual health issues and personal narratives were excluded because the main focus of this study is relationship advice produced by the magazines. The articles were sourced online from the websites of the respective magazines within a two-year span (2015-16). As they are not news articles, we believe that it is not necessary to have exactly the same time frame for each magazine. The articles were written by writers employed by the magazines. None appears to come from the readers themselves. In the US and Middle Eastern magazines, the writers are all female writers except for *Marie Claire* in which a number of articles were written by a male, Lodro Rinzler, who is a well-known relationship coach. The Malaysian articles, on the other hand, were mostly written by female writers but a few articles did not include the names of the writers, thus, the gender of the writers is unknown. From the names stated, it is reasonable to assume that the writers are from the respective

societies or at least are familiar with the socio-cultural milieu of their respective societies.

The articles generally adopt a three-part text structure comprising of the headline, the sub-headline and the body of the text except for the Malaysian articles which mostly have a two-part text structure only with no sub-headline present as they are generally short texts, often with bullet points for brevity. The magazines are published monthly, except *Ahlan* which is published weekly. The names of the magazines are represented in the findings section of this paper through the use of initials for brevity.

In investigating the types of problems that appear in these magazines in their sex and relationship advice articles, we referred to the problem categories found in Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003) study as some of the articles they analysed were similar to those this research examines. However, our study focuses only on the problem categories that appear in the sex and relationship articles of these magazines unlike their study which investigates problems in articles on a number of topics, as mentioned earlier. The analysis of data was conducted using content analysis to identify the problem categories as defined by Machin and van Leeuwen as well as to identify new categories based on our examination of the texts.

With regard to the inter-coder reliability of the data, the data was first analyzed by the researchers separately. After the initial coding, the data was then analyzed again by both researchers and a colleague together. The coding scheme was then further refined and agreed upon by all three coders. Although we did not use statistics to determine inter-coder agreement, we believe that sufficient measures and steps have been undertaken by the researchers to ensure reliability and validity of the coding schema. According to Tinsley and Weiss (2000, 98), inter-rater (or inter-coder) agreement is important because it measures 'the extent to which the different judges tend to assign exactly the same rating to each object'. This fact helped to reaffirm the belief that the frameworks that were conceived with the consensus of the coders was a sound one.

Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003) problem categories are summarised as follows:

Problem categories

1. *Unreliable Partners*: unreliable and selfish friends, lovers and colleagues who take advantage of women, betray them or plot against them behind their backs.
2. *Risky Encounters*: encountering or meeting with new people such as men making advances or new colleagues at work leads to problems which are always full of risks and require a wary attitude.
3. *Institutional Obstacles*: as a result of being in a male-dominated world, women face many difficulties such as obstacles in getting promotions in work, gaining access to some places or activities and achieving different forms of success.

4. *Lack of Confidence*: the problems faced by women as a result of their own inner feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence rather than external factors. These feelings could be attributed to their work environment or related to their bodies or sexual competence.

5. *Sexual Dissatisfaction*: not achieving sexual satisfaction for some reasons such as their insecurity is always problematic for women.

Findings and discussion

Our findings reveal that four of Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003) problem categories are found among the 60 articles analysed while three problem categories that were not found in their study are present in our study. These new problem categories are, 'Institutionalised Bias', 'Lack of Skills', and 'Lack of Knowledge'. As the articles we analysed are exclusively on sex and relationship advice articles unlike Machin and Van Leeuwen's study, it is perhaps expected that new problem categories would emerge from our data. In a few articles, more than one problem category is identified. A main problem is sometimes presented with another minor problem ensconced within it. This occurs in only a few articles and they are included in the analysis. Table 1 below shows the problem categories and the frequency they appear in each of the three contexts:

Table 1: Findings of problem categories and frequency in each context

Problem Category	U.S	Malaysia	Middle East
*Unreliable Partners	0	1	4
*Risky Encounters	7	4	6
*Sexual Dissatisfaction	4	4	0
*Lack of Confidence	0	0	1
**Institutionalised Bias	2	2	4
**Lack of Skills	6	7	4
**Lack of Knowledge	3	4	2

*Machin and Van Leeuwen's categories

**New categories

The problem categories are discussed in more detail in the following sub-sections:

Unreliable Partners

In Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003, 502) definition, this problem category occurs when *"Our fellow human beings are essentially unreliable, especially those closest to us...As a result of their essential unreliability and selfishness, colleagues-at-work and partners-in-love constantly pose problems. They plot against you behind your back, they take advantage of you, they double cross you"*. In our analysis this problem category results from the suffering or pain women may feel due to the discoveries of their partners' betrayals or when they perceive their partners are taking advantage of them. These discoveries happen during the course of a relationship, especially when a woman and man are in a serious

relationship. Machin and Van Leeuwen's definition of 'unreliable partners' include not just sexual/love partners but other people women may encounter, e.g. colleagues and friends as they investigate a wide-range of advice articles while our study focuses on relationship and sex advice articles.

This problem category is found in one article in the Malaysian data and in four articles in the Middle Eastern data, but not in the US data. It also appears to be framed in different ways in the magazines from different contexts. For example, in the Malaysian magazines, 'unreliable' husbands or boyfriends are often caught cheating through electronic gadgets and social media. This fact is reflected by a number of articles in the Malaysian media that seemed to associate a link between the wide-spread availability of social media and the increasing rate of divorce among Malaysian couples including a much-publicized media interview by a leading psychologist in the country (Equivocal 2016). In the Middle Eastern context, on the other hand, the unreliability of a partner can sometimes be framed through the lens of violating cultural norms, for example, a husband who is caught by the wife watching porn. From the Islamic perspective, watching pornography is considered as sinful and unlawful as Islam expressly forbids looking at nudity or watching others have sex (Al-Kawthari 2008, 71) because this will encourage immoral actions. Therefore, women may feel distressed when they discover that their husbands are watching porn as they may consider this act as something that is deviant and against the society's norms. By committing such acts, their husbands are perceived as unreliable partners who have violated marital and societal norms. The US data, however, shows an absence of this problem category presumably because the magazines there focus on issues which relate to sexual pleasure and exploring life rather than commitment as in the Malaysian and the Middle Eastern data.

Risky Encounters

In Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003, 502) definition, this problem category is described as: *"encounters with new people, whether new colleagues at work, or men making advances, are always problematic, always fraught with risk. A wary attitude is called for."* However, in our analysis, this category can also include encounters with people who are not exactly new in a woman's life, but still pose problems for her. Moreover, unlike the previous problem category 'Unreliable Partners', the problem category 'Risky Encounters' in our study occurs when women *suspect* their partners of cheating without necessarily getting a confirmation of their guilt. As a result, these relationships can be 'risky' and call for a wary attitude. In addition, men making advances and casual relationships, for example, are also included as 'Risky Encounters' in our study since there is no commitment from the beginning, and hence, a woman needs to have a wary attitude. This wary attitude helps women to minimize any risks the relationships or encounters may pose.

This problem category appears to be the most prominent problem category for the US magazines, since it is found in several articles. These 'Risky Encounters' with people appear in the form of 'boyfriends', 'friends with benefits' (FWB), and 'a man making advances.' For example, in the article "Breaking the Trust:

Snooping on Your Guy" (MC) women are seen as feeling insecure about their relationships with their boyfriends, which makes them resort to snooping in order to find out hidden truths their partners may hide. For instance, *"One woman I know is sleeping with this guy regularly, but is unsure if they are exclusive... She counts the condoms in his nightstand. If more are missing than what the two of them have used she will know it right away"*. This example clearly demonstrates the inner feeling of insecurities and distrust for her man. Thus, this relationship can be perceived as a risky one as *"they sense there is something that the other person is hiding"* which can hurt them.

This problem category is found in four articles in the Malaysian data in the form of 'boyfriends', 'casual daters', 'a close male friend', and 'casual partners. For example, in the article 'Juicy Read: "It's Just Casual Sex..." (F), the risky encounters appear as casual daters women may meet. It is assumed that women may face risks in such encounters because they may develop feelings after having sex like attachment, jealousy and awkwardness. That is, such encounters can be perceived as risky ones as women may struggle with their feelings as they continue with the relationship. For example, in this article, a girl called Kim says *"When you're totally into a guy, emotions and feelings get in the way, resulting in you feeling used after the deed is done"*. This problem is not categorised under the problem category 'Unreliable Partners' since there is no serious relationship from the beginning between the men and women involved as both only seek satisfaction for their sexual desires. The encounters with casual partners, however, can be fraught with different types of risks, including emotional ones, as shown in this example. It should be noted in this example that 'Risky Encounter' appears in the form of casual daters despite the fact that promiscuity is severely frowned upon in Malaysian society and the government regularly censors publications over sexual content. Perhaps, this article was allowed to be published due to the fact that this issue is discussed in an advice article rather than other types of articles and it also appears as a problematic issue which requires specific solutions in order for the problem to be solved. Most importantly, the writers use non-Muslim names ('Kim' and 'Pamela') for the two girls that were named in the article. Thus, it appears that despite the fact that Malaysia is a generally conservative society, 'racy' and overtly sexual issues can still be allowed to be published but certain considerations have to be met as explained above.

In the Middle Eastern data, this problem category appears in 6 articles in the form of 'boyfriends', 'a man making advances', 'ex-boyfriends', 'a female friend', and 'a man making advances. For example, in the article "How to Avoid Getting Clooney-ed" (AH) a woman may encounter a man making advances who is not really serious about commitment or marriage. This problem falls under the problem category 'Risky Encounters' because there is no agreement for marriage from the beginning as expressed by the phrase *"He's told you from the early days of your relationship that he's just "not into that stuff, not a commitment kinda guy."* The relationship can be perceived as a risky one as women *have already got a dilemma* on their hands, as the men in their lives have clearly

informed them about their stance regarding the relationship, yet these women still harbour hopes that the relationship will develop to the next level.

In the three contexts studied, it is found that the encounters which pose problems for women almost always involved men. Furthermore, it is found that this category does not only include people that women have to deal with in real life, but also those that they encounter on social media. This finding appears in all three contexts studied. Although social media is important for communication and for obtaining information, it can also pose risks to women. For example, in the article “Why Sexting Is Good for You” (CP), some risky encounters are identified due to the presence of some men who are *bad sexters*: “*You probably don't want to engage in this kind of erotica with a guy who shortly after exchanging numbers requests a picture of your tits or any idiot who sends you a Snapchat of his penis after only a few brief exchanges*”. In general, it can be argued that social media is engaged in all of the contexts studied as social media and the issues that can arise from this medium are an inherent part of life now in societies all over the world. It is noted that the majority of social media problems women may face is found under the problem category ‘Risky Encounters’.

Sexual Dissatisfaction

The problem of not achieving sexual satisfaction is found in four articles in the US magazines. For example, the problem of sexual dissatisfaction is illustrated very clearly in the article “How to Destroy Your 6 Biggest Orgasm Obstacles” (CP). Matters such as the size of their men’s penises or their problems with premature ejaculation can lead to sexual dissatisfaction for women as they are not able to achieve orgasm during sexual intercourse. This problem category can also emerge not just from actual sexual encounters but also from *perceived* feelings of sexual dissatisfaction. For example, in the article “Do You Have Sex FOMO?” (CP), some women are perceived as being afraid of not achieving sexual satisfaction before they settle down. This fear is expressed by the following statement “*Sufferers tend to be women in their 20s and 30s, afraid of settling down without an adequate number of sordid sexual experiences under their belts...*”.

This problem category is also found in four articles in the Malaysian magazines. For example, in the article “5 Tricks to Spice up Your Sex Life” (HW), the problem of ‘Sexual Dissatisfaction’ can result from the responsibilities of marriage such as *dropping the kids off at school* and *preparing dinner at home*, as expressed by the phrase ‘*marriage can take a toll on your relationship*’, since these responsibilities may affect sex life which becomes less interesting. This urges women to look for ways to bring the spark back to their relationships, as demonstrated by the phrase ‘*spice up your sex life*’. It is noted that in the Malaysian data, this problem is only implied from euphemistic phrases, such as ‘*Sizzle Things Up in Bed*’, ‘*spice up*’, and ‘*Bring the Spark Back*’, unlike the US data which employs more explicit details.

This problem category does not appear at all in the Middle Eastern women’s magazines due to the restrictions imposed on society as overt discussions of

sexuality continue to be a taboo subject across the Arab world. Discussions on sexual and relationship issues can only be permitted within a religious frame (Mahadeen 2012, 47).

Lack of Confidence

In this problem category, women are seen as being unstable, unconfident, confused, and immature in their choices. Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003, 503) state that this problem category is seen as a personal one which *stem(s) from women's own insecurity and lack of confidence*. For example, in the article "How to Let Go of Past Relationships" (AH) this category appears in the narrative of a girl called Veronica who has a confidence problem resulting from her inability to move on with her life after a series of personal setbacks. Veronica's 'Lack of Confidence' is expressed in the phrases '*she lost her sense of self*' and she almost suffered a complete '*break down*'. Due to her lack of confidence caused by her unstable state of mind, "*she realized her work had suffered and her friends had actually started avoiding her*".

The article above is the only one found in the Middle Eastern data for this problem category. It is totally absent in the US and the Malaysian data. This problem category is less prevalent in our study compared to Machin and Van Leeuwen's findings which were based on articles written in 2001. It appears that there is a gradual shift in the portrayal of women and the problems that they are perceived to be suffering from compared to a decade ago.

Institutionalised Bias

This is a new problem category found in our data. We define it as the bias or double standards imposed on women by society due to its socio-cultural beliefs towards gender roles in general. This new problem category is quite similar to Machin and Van Leeuwen's 'Institutional Obstacles' problem category which is described as: "*...women face many institutional obstacles in a male-dominated world. They may have difficulty in gaining access to certain places or activities, or in getting promotions... Although this is in principle an issue of social and cultural gender inequality, it is usually formulated as a personal problem, and the social and political issues behind it are rarely dealt with explicitly*" (2003, 502). However, based on our findings, we believe that a new category is needed to describe the problems found in our analysis, as the emphasis of this new category is on the biased *perceptions* faced by women imposed by society rather than on *actual* obstacles they face. In other words, we are referring to *psychological discriminations* faced by women such as the stigma of being unmarried rather than *physical discriminations* as in being denied access to an organisation due to their gender, as in Machin and Van Leeuwen's example.

This problem is found in the three contexts studied and it relates to difficulties women may face due to the way society *perceives* them. However, these problems vary across the three societies as a result of socio-cultural differences. For example, in the US and the Middle Eastern data, this category mainly relates to the issue of being single as society shames single women and the stigma associated with being single still exists. As a result of society's judgment, women

may also have personal problems through their feelings of being an outcast and isolated from social gatherings. Just as in Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003) findings for their 'Institutional Obstacles' problem category, this new problem category is also *usually formulated as a personal problem*. In addition, the problem of being single can also be seen as an external one caused by society's perception toward women's relationship status. In *Cosmopolitan*, this category appears in two articles, which are, "Why Are Twentysomething Relationship Virgins on the Rise?" and "Six Lies People Tell You About Being Single". For example, in the latter article, readers were provided with six main reasons why they are still single, such as "*You're Too Picky*" and "*You Don't Know How to Play the Game*". Therefore, the state of being single which appears to be a problem for some women is linked to society's judgments and comments on their single status. Thus, this problem is seen both as an internal and external one; it is internal because of the feelings of loneliness that are, perhaps, experienced by single women and it is external because of society's judgments regarding the reasons why they remain single. For instance, "*So you admit that being single can be lonely...and are informed that you reek of desperation!*". The phrase '*you admit*' asserts that this problem is a personal problem due to the inner feeling of being '*lonely*'. It is also an external problem which results from the society's perceptions as expressed by the passive verb '*are informed*'. This problem is also portrayed through the metaphor phrase '*that you reek of desperation*' which depicts how society views these women as pitiful for being single.

This problem of being single is found in two articles in the Middle Eastern magazines. For example, in the article "Are You the Last Single Girl at the Party?" (AH) this category problem appears in the narrative of a girl called Karen who has experienced two kinds of problems due to her single status. Her first problem, which is personal, results from Karen's feeling of loneliness and desperation, as she says "*When all your girlfriends are married off, it can feel like the end of a party that you're last to leave*". This statement clearly demonstrates her feelings of loneliness, as expressed by the phrases '*the end of a party*' and '*you're last to leave*'. Karen has this feeling because women of her age are supposed to have a husband in terms of society's expectations, as she says "*the rest of the girls have settled down, got married and a few of them have had kids, while I'm still looking for The One*". The other problem, which is an external one, is caused by society's judgment for Karen where her friends treat her differently when it comes to social events and gatherings which makes her feel insecure, and isolated among others. The social stigma of being single causes a serious problem for her as demonstrated by the phrase '*I feel like the odd one out*'. It is noted that in the US magazines, the 'problem' of being single is associated with not having a man in the lives of women while in the Middle Eastern data, it is clearly marked through the lens of not being married and having children.

Another problem relating to this category is the notion of being a virgin which appears in the US and the Middle Eastern data. Yet, this issue appears differently in these two contexts. In the Middle East, women have restrictions on having sex before marriage as it is very important for girls to maintain their virginity till marriage, because "*society will judge them and, because having sex will minimize*

their chances of finding the right man...": "Sex and Other Drugs" (WW). The reason is that family dignity and honour rest on the reputation of the woman, and hence, there is even a restriction on interactions between men and women (Sabbagh 2005: 56). Although some Middle Eastern women are granted a considerable amount of freedom, they are, on the whole, often subjected to strong sanctions for unauthorised behaviours, mostly sexual (Keddie 2007, 167-168). On the other hand, being in a relationship virgin in the US is a personal choice which seems problematic for some women due to socio-cultural beliefs of the US society since "*there is a cultural (and sometimes personal) expectation of shared, baseline sexual experience, and not having it can feel embarrassing*": "Why Are Twentysomething Relationship Virgins on the Rise?" (CP). An example from this article appears in the confession of a girl called Katie who admits that "*I remember the anguish of having to tell my first boyfriend I was a virgin*". Katie's anguish is explained by her society's cultural expectation that being a virgin means she is missing out on important life experiences, especially sexual experience.

With regard to the Malaysian magazines, this problem category appears in two articles. For example, in the article, "Can a Woman and Man JUST Be Close Friends?", this problem category is linked to society's judgments or *people second-guessing* the close friendships between men and women as they predict unreciprocated sexual or romantic attraction for one of them, '*a friendzone case*'. For instance, "*The community judging you negatively; implying there must be something going on between us...*"—Oma". It is observed that in this article the problem is directed towards women only and the views obtained in the article are from women only unlike in some articles where there are quotes from men too, pertaining to an issue related to both men and women. This suggests that society's judgment with regard to this issue is mainly reserved for women due again to the gender inequality that exists in the society. In most societies, including in Malaysian society, women are expected to be more restrained as far as sexual relationships are concerned. This supports Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003) finding for their 'Institutional Obstacle' problem category in the sense that this problem *in principle is an issue of social and cultural gender inequality*.

Lack of Skills

This new problem category, which we found, refers to women who are depicted as lacking some skills which are mainly related to their relationships with men. They need to acquire these relationship and sexual skills in order to develop or maintain their relationships with men. This problem category differs from other problem categories of Machin and Van Leeuwen (2003) since in this category women are seen as inexperienced with men, dating, sex and relationships, and hence, the purpose of these articles is to help them explore new ways or alternatives of doing things beyond the routine and conventional ways which can open a new world of possibilities for them. With regard to lacking sex skills, this new category 'Lack of Skills' does not mean that women are sexually dissatisfied with their relationships as in the category 'Sexual Dissatisfaction', but it means they may lack new sexual techniques that can further enhance their

sexual satisfaction. The problem category 'Lack of Skills' also differs from Machin and Van Leeuwen's problem category 'Lack of Confidence', since the former describes the problem(s) stemming from a woman's lack of skills in some areas of life. This lack of skills may result or be a cause of lack of confidence but these two categories are different as the problem category 'Lack of Skills' is not always linked to *women's own insecurity and lack of confidence*. This new category appears to be more positive than 'Lack of Confidence' as it suggests that problems stemming from lack of social, personal or sexual skills can be overcome quite easily by acquiring those skills. Thus, this can be considered as a new problem category as it is inherently different from the other problem categories in Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003) discourse schema. This problem category appears in six articles in the US magazines and in four articles in the Middle Eastern magazines. It is found in seven articles in the Malaysian data; thus, it appears to be the most prominent problem category in the Malaysian magazines.

In the context of sex skills, the reason for lacking such skills is women's *worries and anxiety* about *having sex for the first time*, as featured in the Middle Eastern data, specifically in the article "Tips for a Pleasant First Time..." (WW). Hence, women's inexperience is the main reason for this problem, which results from the religious and socio-cultural norms as there is an expectation in the society that a girl must be a virgin before marriage. On the other hand, the reason for lacking sex skills in the US data is explained by women's needs to find new exciting sex skills that can turn them into the best lover a man may have, as implied from the headline "6 Ways You Will Be the Best Sex He's Ever Had" (MC). Similar to the US data, the Malaysian data presents the problem of lacking sexual skills within the frame of finding new exciting sex skills that can enhance a couple's sex life, as implied from the headline "10 Things You Must Try for Mind-Blowing Sex" (HW). Hence, unlike the Middle Eastern data where women need sex techniques due to their sexual inexperience, women in the US and the Malaysian data need sex skills for enhancing their sexual experience.

In addition, the articles in the Malaysian data involve the lack of personal and social skills under the domain of *a happier marriage or successful marriage*, the domain of work as women may lack skills which are needed to *strike up a conversation* for an interview, as featured in the article "How to Impress Anyone in 60 Seconds" (F), and the domain of personal life such as lacking the skills needed to enrich their lives, as featured in the article "15 Things You Can Do to Enrich Your Life" (F). In the Middle Eastern articles, the lack of personal and social skills is framed under the domain of *a happy relationship*, which seems similar to the Malaysian ones, the domain of developing *new relationships online*, and the domain of financial issues, as featured in the article "How to Marry a Millionaire" (AH), where women are provided with personal and social skills which are needed to *procuring a prince or just a rich man*. On the other hand, in the US data the lack of personal and social skills is framed under the domains of *a long distance relationship, dating, a break up, and being friends with your ex*. For example, in the article "This Is How You Should Break Up with Him" (MC), women are told that they may lack social skills which relate to suitable ways to

manage a breakup, including *'What to say, where to say it and when to say it'*. Therefore, this problem category is found in different domains across the three contexts studied.

Lack of Knowledge

In this new problem category, women are told that they may lack knowledge or information about social matters which mainly relates to men's thoughts. Therefore, they should be informed and provided with such information. The difference between our other new problem category 'Lack of Skills' and this new category, 'Lack of Knowledge', is that the latter one relates to facts or information that women may not know or are unaware about, thus, they are concerned with mainly theoretical ideas rather than practical ones. That is, this problem category deals with abstract facts that are not known to women, or are known only imprecisely. The category 'Lack of Skills', on the other hand, relates to mainly practical skills, as shown in our examples in the previous section above.

This category is found in three articles in the US magazines. This category is also found in four articles in the Malaysian magazines and in two articles in the Middle Eastern data. In the US data, women may lack knowledge which relates to men's thoughts mainly regarding dating, such as knowledge on dating by the time they are 30, as featured in the article "6 Things You Should Know About Dating by the Time You're 30" (MC), as expressed by the phrase *'should know'* in the headline. However, in the Middle Eastern data women may lack knowledge which mainly relates to men's personality, such as ways to know if a man is ambitious as featured in the article "10 Ways to Know If Your Guy is Really Ambitious", or signs to watch out for to detect a man's *lack of a (sic) personal hygiene*, as featured in the article "7 Signs He'll Always Stink!". The reason for not tackling the knowledge of dating in the Middle Eastern data is that there is no culture of dating in this conservative society. On the other hand, in the Malaysian data, it seems that this problem category is more diverse than in the Middle Eastern and the US data since knowledge women may lack relates to sex as well as men's personality as featured in the article "4 Things You Never Knew about Men and Sex" (HW) and the article "Do Short Men Make Better Husbands?" (HW), for example.

Conclusion

All of Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003) problem categories are found in our data except 'Institutional Obstacles'. However, not all of these categories are found in all of the contexts studied. For example, the problem category 'Lack of Confidence' is only found in the Middle Eastern magazines while 'Sexual Dissatisfaction' is not present at all in this particular context. The problems arising from 'Unreliable Partners', on the other hand, do not occur in the US magazines, as discussed earlier in our findings. This suggests that Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003) claims that their problem-solution discourse schema found in women's magazines across cultures is "*a global socio-cognitive schema for interpreting the problems and vicissitudes that can arise in women's lives*", may

not necessarily be true as far as locally-produced women's magazines are concerned. Although they state that their schema "*does allow for cultural difference*" and their findings do show differences in the distribution of problem categories and variations in how these problems are constructed across cultures, our findings suggest that these differences are more pronounced if the magazines analysed are local, home-grown publications rather than local editions of international magazines. Local publications are likely to have more control over their content and the problems that they choose to highlight are those that they think women in their society need answers to. Thus, this factor along with the focus on just relationship and sex advice rather than on advice articles in general may account for the differences found in this study in the problem-solution discourse schema identified by Machin and Van Leeuwen. Although we agree in general with Machin and Van Leeuwen that their problem-solution discourse schema is a global model for the representation of social practices, we argue that based on our findings, there are greater variations in how these problems are formulated in home-grown women's magazines than those found by them.

The three new problem categories identified in this study ('Institutionalised Bias', 'Lack of Skills', and 'Lack of Knowledge') also suggest that the problem categories identified by Machin and Van Leeuwen earlier may have evolved over the last two decades. As discussed earlier, their problem category 'Lack of Confidence' appears to be less relevant now as only one example is found in our data. On the other hand, based on our findings, 'Lack of Knowledge' and 'Lack of Skills' appear to be among the most prominent problem categories in all three contexts. Perhaps this reflects the current obsession on the 'self-improvement culture' as described by McGee (2005), an obsession fuelled by publications such as the magazines analysed in this study. Women in all three contexts are constantly bombarded with self-improvement advice by the writers of these articles, at least one of whom is identified as a male, as stated earlier. As these so-called 'problems' are produced by the magazines and what they perceive to be issues and concerns faced by women in their society, our findings suggest that the writers of home-grown magazines, who we believe are from their respective societies or at least familiar with the cultural set-up of their societies, perceive their community of readers as global citizens of the world who face problems women all over the world face but at the same time, their so-called problems are coloured and shaped by socio-cultural factors surrounding their respective societies. As the writers of these articles are believed to be from the respective societies, we also argue that perhaps, the problem categories found in this research are more 'authentic' than in Machin and Van Leeuwen's study, even if the problems are not from the readers themselves.

On the whole, we observe that even though there are variations in the definitions and contextualisation of each problem category in the three contexts, as discussed above, the overall *aim* of these articles is rather similar. This is noted by Machin and Van Leeuwen too in their study. The very nature of the 'problems' constructed by the writers of the magazines such as 'Lack of Skills' or 'Lack of Knowledge' (among the most common 'problems' in all three contexts), suggests

that the possible solutions offered to the readers are to help women equip themselves with the necessary skills or knowledge to achieve a more successful life. The problems that are selected by these magazines seemed to be those in which ready answers are possible, solutions that can guide and inspire women to achieve their life goals of freedom and independence. Thus, empowerment of women appears to be emphasised in all three contexts but with variations in how this concept is expressed in the respective societies, as discussed in our previous section.

Works Cited

- Al-Kawthari, Muhammad. *Islamic Guide to Sexual Relations*. Tooting. Huma Press, 2008.
- Berns, Nancy. "My Problem and How I Solved it": Domestic Violence in Women's Magazines. *The Midwest Sociological Society*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 1999, pp. 85-108.
- Brown, Ann and Tess Knight. "Shifts in Media Images of Women's Appearance and Social Status from 1960 to 2010: A Content Analysis of Beauty Advertisements in Two Australian Magazines." *Journal of Aging Studies*, Vol. 35, 2015, pp. 74-83.
- Caldas-Coulthard, Carmen Rosa. 'Women Who Pay for Sex. And Enjoy it': Transgression Versus Morality in Women's Magazines. In Caldas-Coulthard, Carmen Rosa and Malcolm Coulthard (Eds.), *Text and Practice: Reading in Critical Discourse Analysis*. Routledge, 1996.
- Ceulemans, Mieke and Guido Fauconnier. *Mass Media: The Image, Role, and Social Conditions of Women. A Collection and Analysis of Research Materials*. Catholic University of Leuven, the Department of Communication Science. Paris: UNESCO, 1979.
- Conlin, Lindsey and Kim Bissell. "Beauty Ideals in the Checkout Aisle: Health-related Messages in Women's Fashion and Fitness Magazines." *Journal of Magazine and New Media Research*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2014, pp. 1-19.
- Conradie, Marthinus. "Constructing Femininity: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Cosmo." *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2011, pp. 401-417.
- Crusmac, Oana. "Post-feminism and Specialized Media: A Content Analysis of Cosmopolitan Headlines." *Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 15, 2013.
- Erjavec, Karmen. "How to Have Good Sex? The Cosmopolitan's Construction of Common Sense and Consensual View of Sexuality." *Medijska istraživanja*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2006, pp. 41-62.
- Equivocal. Malaysia: "Electronic Gadgets and Social Media Partly Responsible for Divorce among Couples." [ONLINE] Available at: <https://thecoverage.my/technology/malaysia-electronic-gadgets-social-media-partly-responsible-for-divorce-among-couples/>. 2016, [Accessed 8 April 2022].
- Farvid, Panteá and Virginia Braun. "'Most of us Guys are Raring to Go Anytime, Anyplace, Anywhere': Male and Female Sexuality in Cleo and Cosmo." *Sex Roles*, Vol. 55, 2006, pp. 295-310.

- Gattuso, Suzy, Fullagar, Simone, and Ilena Young. "Speaking of Women's 'Nameless Misery': The Everyday Construction of Depression in Australian Women's Magazines." *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 61, No. 8, 2005, pp. 1640-1648.
- Gauntlett, David. *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2008.
- Gill, Rosalind. "Mediated Intimacy and Post Feminism: A Discourse Analytic Examination of Sex and Relationships." *Discourse and Communication*, Vol. 3, 2010, pp. 345-369.
- Hochel, Sandra. "To Veil or Not to Veil: Voices of Malaysian Muslim Women." *Intercultural Communication Studies*, Vol. XXII, No. 2, 2013, pp. 40-57.
- Ibrahim, Ismail. *Women's Magazines in the Arab World*. International Pub. & Dist. House, 1996.
- Keddie, Nikki. *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present*. Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Lorenset, Caroline. *Visual and Lexicogrammatical Analysis of Websites of Women's Magazines*. The International Gender and Language Association, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina – UFSC, 2012.
- Lulu, Reem and Sharifah Alkaff. "'Put on That Red Lipstick': Cross-Cultural Analysis of Solutions in Advice Articles of Women's Magazines." *Çankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 13, No.2, 2019, pp. 187-204.
- Machin, David and Joanna Thornborrow. "Branding and Discourse: The Case of Cosmopolitan." *Discourse and Society*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2003, pp. 453-471.
- Machin, David and Joanna Thornborrow. "Lifestyle and the Depoliticisation of Agency: Sex as Power in Women's Magazines." *Social Semiotics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2006, pp. 173-188.
- Machin, David and Theo Van Leeuwen. "Global Schemas and Local Discourses in Cosmopolitan." *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2003, pp. 493-512.
- Mahadeen, Ebtihal. "Reflecting on Media Texts as Platforms for Sexuality Research in Arab Countries." *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 9.3, 2012, pp. 47-53.
- McGee, Micki. *Make-over Culture in American Life*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Morris, Penelope. "A Window on the Private Sphere: Advice Columns, Marriage, and the Evolving Family in 1950s Italy." *The Italianist*, Vol. 27, 2007, pp. 304-332.
- Nydell, Margaret. *Understanding Arabs: A Contemporary Guide to Arab Society*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2012.
- Sabbagh, Amal. *The Arab States: Enhancing Women's Political Participation*. In J. Ballington, and A. Karam (Eds.), *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* (pp. 52-71). International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2005.
- Tinsley, Howard E. and David Weiss. *Interrater Reliability and Agreement*. In H. E. A. Tinsley and S. D. Brown, Eds., *Handbook of Applied Multivariate Statistics and Mathematical Modelling*, pp. 95-124. Academic Press, 2000.
- Wang, Lay K. "Ways of Seeing Malaysian Women: Sketches of Women in Magazines in the Global Age." *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 22, 2006, pp. 117-133.
- Zhao, Miao and Yimin Zhu. "A Content Analysis of Advertisements in Women's Fashion Magazines in China." *Proceedings of the 17th International Academic Conference*, (pp. 632-632). Vienna, 2015.