

# ***“Put on that red lipstick”*: Cross-cultural Analysis of Solutions in Advice Articles of Women’s Magazines**

Kadın Dergilerindeki Çözüm Önerilerinin Kültürlerarası Karşılaştırması

**Reem Adib Lulu**

**Sharifah Nurul Huda Alkaff**

University Brunei Darussalam, Brunei

## **Abstract**

Women’s magazines are widely seen as mirrors of social change in society; thus they have increasingly become an important topic for scholarly exploration. This paper focuses on the sex and relationship advice column in locally-produced English language women’s magazines in the US, the Middle East, and Malaysia. Sixty relationship advice articles were obtained online from the selected magazines. The study investigates the solutions these publications promote to their readers. It also examines whether these solutions reflect the dominant values of the respective society, or do they challenge them. Machin and Van Leeuwen’s problem-solution discourse schema is used to analyse the texts. Although Machin and Van Leeuwen’s solution categories of their problem-solution discourse schema are found in our data, not all of these categories are found in all of the contexts studied. This study also finds an additional four solution categories, namely, ‘Pleasing Oneself’, ‘Acquiring Knowledge’, ‘Taking Responsibility’, and ‘Forgiveness’. In addition, the socio-cultural, political and religious beliefs of the three parts of the world studied reflect the types of solutions appearing in the articles. The findings of this study also suggest that frames of femininity are polarised to form two images of women: a traditional feminine image of women and an empowered image of women.

**Keywords:** Women’s magazines, Sexuality, Cross-cultural, Solution categories, Female empowerment

## **Öz**

Kadın dergileri, genellikle toplumdaki sosyal değişimin bir aynası olarak görülmektedir. Dolayısıyla, kadın dergileri bilimsel araştırmalar için giderek önemli bir konu haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, ABD, Ortadoğu ve Malezya’daki İngilizce yayımlanan yerel kadın dergilerindeki ilişki tavsiyeleriyle ilgili köşe yazılarına odaklanmaktadır. Seçili dergilerden ilişki tavsiyesi üzerine yazılan 60 makaleye çevrim içi olarak erişim sağlanmıştır. Yapılan bu çalışma, yayımlanan dergilerin okuyucularına önerdiği çözümleri incelemektedir. Aynı zamanda çözüm önerilerinin ilgili toplumdaki baskın değerleri yansıttıp yansıtmadığı ve bu değerlere karşı çıkıp çıkmadığını da araştırmaktadır. Metinlerin analizinde Machin ve Van Leeuwen’in problem çözme söylem şeması kullanılmıştır. Bu söylem şemasının çözüm kategorilerinin hepsi veride yer almaktadır, ancak her kategori incelenen tüm bağlamlarda bulunmamaktadır. Analizler sonucunda, bu kategorilere ek olarak dört çözüm kategorisi daha ortaya konmuştur: "Kendini memnun etmek", "Bilgi edinmek", "Sorumluluk almak" ve 'Affetmek'. Bunlara ek olarak, makalelerde görülen çözüm türleri, ele alınan üç bölgenin sosyokültürel, politik ve dini inanışlarını

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ORCID#: 0000-0002-7737-2465; 0000-0001-6534-1381; reemadiblulu@gmail.com

yansıtmaktadır. Aynı zamanda, kadınlık algısının kutuplaştırıldığı ve iki farklı kadın imgesi olduğu görülmektedir: geleneksel kadın imgesi ve kendi ayakları üzerinde duran güçlü kadın imgesi.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kadın dergileri, Cinsiyet, Kültürlerarası, Çözüm kategorileri, Kadının güçlendirilmesi

## Introduction

Women's magazines have been one of the most popular media forms around the world. They have played an essential role in the production, reproduction to hegemonic cultural norms around sexuality, race, class and gender, as well as challenges to such norms (Kitsa and Mudra). Women's magazines cover different kinds of advice related to women's issues under different columns, such as advice on lifestyle, fashion, beauty and others. One of these columns is sex and relationship advice, which is the focus of our present study. As asserted by Morris, sex and relationship advice articles are very important since they deal with private problems in a very public sphere (326). That is, they include the very serious treatment of issues which are focused on in the socio-political discourse of the day.

The majority of studies on women's magazines have been conducted on advertisements (Akinro and Mbunyuza-Memani Renaldo; Mbure and Aubrey). Other studies carried out on women's magazines investigate the ways in which women's magazines' producers understand feminism (Favaro and Gill; Kitsa and Mudra). Studies on sex and relationship advice articles are under-researched in the literature of studies on contemporary women's magazines. Among these are studies by Lorensen and Conradie who explore the linguistic constructions of advice articles. Other scholars investigate the dominant themes of advice articles (Gill; Gupta et al.), while Machin and Thornborrow ("Branding and Discourse;" "Lifestyle and the Depoliticisation of Agency") examine other aspects such as the discourse of sex and power in these magazines. A recent study by Temmerman et al. analyses the textual representation of men, women and their mutual relationships on three Flemish women's magazines, from the period 1953-2013. Their findings reveal that women's relationships with men are still integral to the ethos of these magazines. They also find that the topic of marriage has declined and the existence of a loving man in women's world is still an important topic.

Furthermore, there are fewer studies that offer a cross-cultural comparison of advice columns in women's magazines. Among these studies are "Global Schemas and Local Discourses in *Cosmopolitan*" by Machin and Van Leeuwen and "A Cross-cultural Study of Relationship Advice Articles in Women's Magazines" and "A Cross-cultural Study of Persuasive Strategies in Relationship Advice Articles in Women's Magazines" by Lulu and Alkaff. Machin and Van Leeuwen explore advice articles on a number of topics including work, sexuality and relationships in several international editions of *Cosmopolitan* ("Global Schemas"). They reveal that a 'problem-solution' discourse schema is used for all the articles analysed, regardless of the topic. They also report 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. Lulu and Alkaff, on the other hand, investigate the prevailing values in the relationship and sex advice articles of

home-grown women's magazines from three different contexts, which are, Malaysia, the Middle East (the UAE and Egypt), and the US. They find that the producers of these articles are aware of the values of their society ("Cross-cultural Study"). They also confirm that women's empowerment is foregrounded in the texts analysed; however, this empowerment is constructed within a traditional framework of male-female roles. It should be highlighted that Lulu and Alkaff's study investigates messages which are either foregrounded or backgrounded in sex and relationship advice articles unlike this study which specifically examines the solution categories appear in such articles.

Our study is important as few studies are carried out on home-grown English language women's magazines in non-Western contexts in particular. Few studies have also been conducted to explore the categories of the problem-solution schema in sex and relationship advice articles. Hence, this research has attempted to explore further what is known about the genre of sex and relationship advice articles in women's magazines, and has hoped to bridge the existing gap in this area.

In this present study, sex and relationship advice articles in six home-grown English language women's magazines from three different contexts, namely, the Middle East (Egypt and UAE), the US and Malaysia, are explored to find out the kinds of relationship solutions that appear in each context. Analysing home-grown women's magazines would provide better understandings on the values they seek to promote in relation to the norms or values of the society they are set in rather than analysing local editions of international magazines. Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

1. What kinds of solutions 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 these solutions reflect the dominant norms and values of the respective society, or do they challenge them?

## **Methodology**

The data for this study were drawn from six locally-produced English language women's magazines, two women's magazines from each of the three contexts. As mentioned earlier, analysing these magazines rather than local editions of international magazines would help us to explore whether the values of these publications reflect local norms of their society or whether they have adopted a more global outlook on women's issues. We chose the three contexts, that is the US, Malaysia and the Middle East based on our belief 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). Furthermore, our data are drawn upon two Middle Eastern countries since there are few locally produced English language women's magazines in the region. It is also important to highlight that most Middle Eastern countries share a similarity of thinking regardless of their economic and cultural

differences because of homogeneity in terms of language and religious beliefs, as confirmed by many scholars (Moghadam; Nydell).

The two women's magazines selected from the US are *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*. The former is the best-selling women's magazine in the US and the world, while the latter competes with the international editions of *Cosmopolitan*. These magazines are published by *Hearst Magazines*, which is one of the world's largest publishers of monthly magazines. The two women's magazines selected from Malaysia are *Her World* and *Female*. The former is the first local English language women's magazine in Malaysia while the latter is Malaysia's top selling lifestyle magazine. These two women's magazines are published by *Blu Inc Media*, Malaysia's biggest publisher of magazines. The two Middle Eastern women's magazines selected are *What Women Want* (Egypt) and *Ahlan* (UAE). The former is one of the leading English language lifestyle women's magazines in Egypt while the latter is the first home-grown English language lifestyle women's magazine to hit the shelves in the Middle East. The names of the magazines studied are represented in the findings of this study through the use of initials for brevity.

Sixty articles, ten from each magazine, were retrieved from the sex and relationship advice sections of the magazines. The articles were sourced online from the websites of the respective magazines because online magazines are expected to be accessed by a greater number of women as they are free and shared in different social media like Twitter and Facebook, as confirmed by Karan et al. The articles were chosen from the time period of 2013-2015. As these articles are not news articles, we believe that it is not necessary to have exactly the same time frame covered for each magazine.

In exploring the types of solutions that appear in these magazines in their sex and relationship advice articles, we referred to the solution categories found in Machin and Van Leeuwen's "Global Schemas and Local Discourses in *Cosmopolitan*" study since some of the articles they analysed were similar to those this research examines. However, our study focuses only on the solution categories that appear in the sex and relationship articles of these magazines unlike their study which explores solutions in articles on a number of topics, as mentioned earlier. Furthermore, in this paper, we only focus on solution categories and we exclude problem categories as we believe problem categories need a separate research or paper to be discussed in details.

The categories of solutions of Machin and Van Leeuwen are summarised as follows:

1. Acquiring Skills: learning new skills might relate to self-presentation, and the intentional exploitation of women's attractiveness through dressing, seductive behaviour, or even being well organised.
2. Rejection: this solution is a way to deal with people women should not easily trust by cutting off the relationship or withdrawing.
3. Communication: it means 'talking things over' and it is always a frequent solution for the problem 'Unreliable Partners'.
4. Pleasing People: when having problems with others (especially men) then the solution is pleasing them through some ways such as seductive behaviour or flattery.

5. Taking Control: taking the initiative almost always related only to sexual problems. ("Global Schemas and Local Discourses in Cosmopolitan")

With regard to the inter-coder reliability, the data was first analysed by the researchers separately to identify themes and coding categories. After the initial coding, the data was then analysed again by both researchers and a colleague together. Both a priori codes and emergent codes that have been obtained from the analysis of the data were studied. 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, 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' (98). This helped to reaffirm the proposition that the frameworks that were conceived with the consensus of coders were sound.

## Findings

The analysis of the data reveals that all of Machin and Van Leeuwen's solution categories in their "Global Schemas and Local Discourses in Cosmopolitan" are found among the 60 articles analysed. The findings also reveal an additional four solution categories that were not found in their study are present in our study. These new solution categories are, 'Acquiring Knowledge', 'Taking Responsibility', 'Pleasing Oneself' and 'Forgiveness'. As the articles we analysed are exclusively on sex and relationship advice articles unlike Machin and Van Leeuwen's study, it is expected that new solution categories would emerge from our data.

In some articles, more than one solution categories are identified. A main solution is sometimes presented with another minor solution ensconced within it. Table 1 below shows the solution categories and the frequency they appear in each of the three contexts:

Solution Category	US	Malaysia	Middle East
*Acquiring skills	9	11	7
*Rejection	4	1	5
*Communication	7	7	7
*Pleasing people	2	3	2
*Taking control	3	2	0
**Acquiring knowledge	7	5	3
**Pleasing Oneself	3	4	3
**Taking Responsibility	6	3	10
**Forgiveness	0	0	2

* Machin and Van Leeuwen's categories
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** New categories
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**Table 1.** The frequency of solution categories in sex and relationship advice articles in women's magazines

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

### ***Acquiring skills***

Women are highly advised to learn new skills, either sexual, personal, or social skills, in order to constructively deal with some problems in their lives. This category appears to be the most prominent solution category in the US and the Malaysian data, and the second prominent category in the Middle Eastern data. This finding matches Machin and Van Leeuwen's findings that this solution category is a frequently proposed solution ("Global Schemas"). In the article "How to Destroy Your 6 Biggest Orgasm Obstacles" (CP), for example, women are advised to learn new sex skills to overcome sex problems. For instance, the sex skill women should learn for the sex problem "He's Got a Tiny Penis" is "Have him try thrusting in a circular motion with his hips — the circling creates a fuller feeling than the classic in and out". In another example, in the Malaysian data, the article "10 Things You Must Try for Mind-Blowing Sex" (HW) provides sexual skills for women such as "Take a shower together", "Do it blindfolded", and "Read Erotica".

The article "How to Marry a Millionaire" (AH), in the Middle Eastern data, provides women with personal and social skills which are needed to *snare* a rich man. The personal or self-presentation skills relate to women's physical attractiveness through makeup and clothing style, for instances, "Back away from the blusher and put down that eyebrow pencil" and "Wear dresses that fit your body type". Women are also advised to learn social skills which relate to the way they communicate with rich men, for instances, "avoid controversial topics like religion and politics" and "engage in positive conversation and show an interest in his life and stories". These pieces of advice are imperatives, and hence, women seem to be submissive as they are encouraged to satisfy rich men in order to *procure* them.

### ***Rejection***

Women may feel resentment towards people, especially men, and they seek ways to overcome such feelings either through withdrawing or cutting off the relationship. This solution category appears in four articles in the US data, three of them as a subordinate solution and one as a main solution. In the article "Do You Have Sex FOMO?" (CP), for example, the solution for the problem of sexual dissatisfaction can be found in the two separate narratives of Raquel and Zoe. Due to their (perceived) problem of sexual dissatisfaction, they both rejected their boyfriends, as demonstrated by the following phrases, 'she broke up with her boyfriend' and 'ditching our boyfriends'.

In the Middle Eastern women's magazines, this category appears as a subordinate solution category in five articles. In the article "Marital Porn\_ Is Watching Porn the Real Deal Breaker?" (WW), for example, which is basically an account of the unreliability of a husband who secretly watches porn, one proposed solution is expressed in the following statement "If you have a partner who masturbates while

*watching porn 15 times a day...in those situations divorce and/or sex addiction rehab might be the right thing to do*". The solution category 'Rejection' is demonstrated by the noun '*divorce*'.

This category appears in one article in the Malaysian data, which is, "Would You Snoop on Your Boyfriend's Phone While He's Asleep?". It appears as a subordinate solution category in the two separate sample narratives of the characters mentioned in the articles, Joanna and Hannah, where both rejected their boyfriends because the former discovered that her boyfriend, Ted, *had been keeping in touch with a former flame*, and the latter discovered that her boyfriend cheated on her with his female friend as he *had been staying over at her place secretly*. This category is expressed in this article by the phrases '*These revelations pushed her to end their relationship*', and '*she finally had enough and broke up with him*'.

It is observed that the solution category 'Rejection' does not only appear when women reject their relationship with men but also when they refuse a new idea such as their refusal to meet new people online, as featured in the article "Are You a Screen Siren?" (AH). In this article, this category appears in the narrative of a girl called Daniella who *had a hard time meeting interesting new people* during her stay in Dubai. She rejects the solution of communication through *Tinder* to find new people, as expressed by the phrase '*she dismissed it as superficial and shallow*'. It also appears when women withdraw from a pregnant friend, as shown in the article "How to Handle Your Best Friend Getting Pregnant" (CP), where the writer *drifted apart* from her pregnant friend.

In Machin and Van Leeuwen's findings, this solution category is proposed when '*people form a potential risk and should not be trusted too easily*' ("Global Schemas" 504). However, our data showed that this solution category is also found when women are sexually dissatisfied with their relationships with their partners, as revealed in the US data and shown in the example above. Furthermore, Machin and Van Leeuwen find that this solution occurs often in the Asian versions of *Cosmopolitan* they have studied ("Global Schemas"). However, this study finds that this solution category occurs only in one article in the Malaysian data, and hence, this finding contradicts Machin and Van Leeuwen's findings. This could be due to the fact that they studied the Asian versions of international magazines, unlike our study which investigates home-grown magazines.

### **Communication**

Women may solve their problems with men or friends through communication or '*talking things over*'. This category appears in seven articles in the US data. It appears as a main solution in five articles and as a subordinate category solution in two articles. In the article "Are You on the Verge of a Public Meltdown?" (CP), for example, this solution category appears as a solution after experiencing a public meltdown which results from the feeling of being *upset and tempted to go public* through *airing our frustrations online* in the social media. The solution category is expressed by the following phrases of communication '*consult your people*', '*talk to the people*', and '*address the problem*'.

In the Malaysian women's magazines, this solution category appears in seven articles—as a main solution category in five articles and a subordinate solution category in the others. It is mainly proposed for women to solve sex problems, through communication. In the article “5 Tricks to Spice Up Your Sex Life” (HW), for example, this solution category is presented in the following phrases *'Address emotional needs'*, *'the intimate conversation'*, and *'Talk openly about your sex lives'*.

This solution category appears in seven articles in the Middle Eastern women's magazine. It appears as a main category in five articles and as a subordinate solution category in the others. In the article “Tips for a Pleasant First Time...” (WW), for example, which is basically an account of the lack of sex skills due to it being the first time for sex, this solution category is expressed through different types of communication; communication between a husband and a wife as demonstrated by the phrases, *'Create an understanding and cooperative environment'* and *'Be patient and communicate with each other'*, communication between a woman and medical specialists as expressed by *'To avoid first day failures or disappointments, read up and ask medical specialists'*, and communication between a couple and their family as expressed by the phrase *'Communicate with the families your need for privacy and stress to them that no proof is needed for a bride's chastity'*.

### ***Taking control***

In this solution category, women are advised to take the initiative to solve sexual problems. This solution category is found in three articles in the US data, as a main solution category in one article and as a subordinate category in the others. In the article “How to Destroy Your 6 Biggest Orgasm Obstacles” (CP), for example, the solution for the problem of sexual dissatisfaction *'He's Got a Huge Penis'* is to *“...get on top to control the speed and lean forward to limit depth”*.

In the Malaysian women's magazines, this solution category appears in two articles as a subordinate solution category. In the article “10 Things You Must Try for Mind-Blowing Sex” (HW), for example, this solution category is demonstrated by the following verb phrases *'Take control'*, *'Initiate sex'*, and *'Go on Top'*. The phrases *'you're the one in control'* and *'you're taking control'* also express this category and show women in control of how they have sex. Thus, as our examples have shown, this solution category is confined to solving sexual problems, similar to Machin and Van Leeuwen (“Global Schemas”). It is found that this solution category does not exist in the Middle Eastern data because topics which relate to sexuality continue to be a taboo subject across the Arab world (Mahadeen 47).

### ***Pleasing people***

Women may please people, mainly men, by paying attention to their feelings. This solution category is found in two articles in the US women's magazines as a subordinate solution category. In the article, “This Is How You Should Break Up with Him”, for example, this solution appears as a subordinate solution category where *'Acquiring Skills'* is the main proposed category. In this article, women are advised to follow appropriate ways of breakup related to time, place and way of saying the breakup with the purpose of paying attention to men's feelings: for instances, *“Don't make him cry at a restaurant...so don't do that to him”* and *“Don't do it right after a family member of his dies”*.



This solution category is found in two articles in the Malaysian women's magazines. It appears as a subordinate solution category where 'Acquiring Skills' is the main solution category for the two articles. In the article "10 Secrets to a Successful Marriage" (HW), for example, women are advised to satisfy their men by pleasing them for the sake of improving the marital and sexual relationship. This solution category is clearly demonstrated by the following imperatives: "Don't ask your man to work on the house when you know he's tied up with a deadline at the office or had a rough week at work" and "Bite your tongue sometimes: Do not criticise your man for the work he has done." However, it seems that women are taught to be submissive as they learned to be compliant to their partners and value their partners' pleasure over their own.

In the Middle Eastern women's magazines, this solution category is found in three articles. It appears as a subordinate solution category in two articles and as a main solution category in the other. This category appears as a subordinate solution category for the problem of unreliable partner in the article "Marital Porn\_ Is Watching Porn the Real Deal Breaker?", where there is another proposed solution category, which is, 'Rejection', as previously mentioned, the 'Pleasing People' category is expressed in the following piece of advice "Ask yourself this, is it really worth breaking up a whole family over some tasteless, anonymous videos on the internet?". In this advice, the writer suggests that the woman should think about her family because if she follows the 'Rejection' solution it means 'breaking up a whole family'. The writer is also seen trying to trivialise the problem by describing these videos as being *tasteless* and *anonymous* ones. The writer is also seen trying to indirectly inform the woman that the decision of divorce may make her family suffer. Hence, she should consider her family's feelings over her own.

### ***Acquiring knowledge***

In this solution category, which we have found, women must access new information and be up-to-date with new streams of knowledge which are related to current social issues, especially pertaining to sex and relationships. Unlike the solution category 'Acquiring Skills', the solutions presented under the solution category 'Acquiring Knowledge' are presented in the form of informative advice about situations that women should know or take into their consideration. Hence, this solution category relates to theoretical facts or abstract information women should know rather than practical tips or instructions of skills. In such a case, this solution category helps women to have a clear understanding about different social issues. This solution category is found in three articles in the US women's magazines. The article "6 Things You Should Know About Dating by the Time You're 30" (MC), for example, provides information that women should know about dating such as "Flowers Are a Given", "A Man Will Not Complete You", and "Space Is a Good Thing".

This solution category appears in five articles in the Malaysian women's magazines. The article "Here's How Women Can have More Sex with Their Man" (F), for example, provides women with the solution for the problem of sexual dissatisfaction through informing them that *women who have more male friends and colleagues tend to have more sex than women who often surround themselves*

*with females instead*'. On the other hand, this solution category appears in three articles in the Middle Eastern women's magazines. In the article "How to Avoid Getting Clooney-ed" (AH), for example, women are provided with signs they should know to watch out when the guy is interested in marriage. One sign, for instance, *"He hasn't introduced you to family or friends after sometime together"*.

### ***Pleasing oneself***

In this solution category, which we have found, women are advised to please and focus on themselves by finding alternatives for the problematic issues they may face in order to be happy and to please themselves. This solution category is opposite to Machin and Van Leeuwen's solution category 'Pleasing People', in which women are advised to please others, especially the men in their lives, by paying attention to their feelings. However, the solution category 'Pleasing Oneself' encourages women to make themselves a priority through satisfying their own hopes and dreams and paying attention to their own feelings instead of solely paying attention to others' feelings. This category appears in three articles in the US women's magazines as a subordinate solution category. In the article "16 Tips for Surviving the First Year of Your Relationship" (MC), for example, this solution category is clearly demonstrated in the following tip *"Spend plenty of time with your friends...even at the beginning when you're totally obsessed with each other...You'll need your friends later..."* In this example women are encouraged to please themselves by surrounding themselves with their friends who can provide happiness and support rather than just focusing on their lovers. It is noted that the solution category 'Pleasing People' is used more than the 'Pleasing Oneself' category in this article since the latter occurs in one tip while the former occurs in four tips, which are, *"Be a generous compliment-giver"*, *"Go to their family/work events if you're invited"*, *"Don't Judge their sex habits"*, and *"Get to know their friends in doses"*.

With regards to the Malaysian women's magazines, this solution category appears in four articles as a subordinate solution category in those articles, where the solution category 'Acquiring Skills' is the main solution. For example, in the article "5 Tricks to Spice Up Your Sex Life" (HW) this solution category is clearly demonstrated in the following tip: *"Explore other ways: You don't need to have intercourse to enjoy sexual pleasure. There are plenty of other ways to have fun such as manual sex, mutual masturbation, or even using sex toys"*. In this example, the woman is an actor who makes herself happy through seeking other ways or alternatives for her sex pleasure, as expressed by the verb 'explore'. Such pleasure can be gained through alternatives to intercourse, which are, 'manual sex', 'mutual masturbation', and 'using sex toys'. Other examples of phrases that propose this solution category from other articles include *'Do something to feel sexy'*, *'Put on that red lipstick'*, and *'Smell like a million bucks'*.

In the Middle Eastern women's magazines, this solution category appears in three articles. For example, in the article "Are You the Last Single Girl at the Party?" (AH) which is basically an account of the problem of the social stigma of being single as perceived by society, single women are advised to please themselves through finding alternatives for the feeling of being an outcast among other members in the society, as expressed by the following piece of advice *"Be a smug singleton. On your way over to social events, think about the things in your life that*

*you are finding especially interesting or meaningful or rewarding, then share those wonderful experiences with the other guests”.*

### ***Taking responsibility***

In this solution category, which we have found, women are responsible for finding appropriate solutions to problems they might face in life. Their ultimate success depends on their choices. That is, they are encouraged to make their own decisions which are perceived to be part of the solution. It is worth noting that the difference between ‘Taking Control’, which is one of Machin and Van Leeuwen’s solution categories, and ‘Taking Responsibility’ is that the former only relates to solving sexual problems. This new category is found in six articles in the US women’s magazines, as a main solution category in five articles and as a subordinate category in the other. In the article “How to Handle Your Best Friend Getting Pregnant” (CP), for example, women may *experience some growing pains* that result from their pregnant friends as pregnancy may threaten their relationship and they may *feel a little betrayed*. Hence, three possibilities of solutions are provided in the body of the text. The first proposed solution category is ‘Rejection’, which appears through the personal experience of the writer, who withdrew or *‘drifted apart’* from her pregnant friend and she replaced the damaged relationship through finding other *likeminded women*. The second proposed solution category is ‘Communication’, where women are advised to communicate with their pregnant friend through finding *ways to renegotiate the friendship*. The other proposed solution is ‘Pleasing Oneself’, where women are encouraged to find some alternatives to overcome the damaged relationship. These alternatives which aim to please women are expressed by the phrases *‘Get in touch with yourself’*, *‘Maybe you want...a husband and baby’*, and *‘make more friends’*. In this case, the final solution is that women are responsible for choosing their lifestyle, and hence, they should take a step to overcome a specific problem they may face.

In the Malaysian women’s magazines, this solution category appears in three articles. In the article ‘Juicy Read: “It’s Just casual Sex...” (F), for example, the solution for *whether casual relationship necessarily end up in heartache for women* is implicated from the two separate narratives of two girls, Kim and Pamela, where both present their opinions based on their experience on this field. The opinions of the two girls show the pros and cons of casual relationships. For example, Kim sees the pro of casual sex as that *‘one doesn’t have to deal with the problems that couples do in serious relationships’*. On the other hand, her con of such a relationship is that *‘one might miss little things like having someone to come home to or someone to hold hands with’*. Kim also easily gets attached to the man which leaves her *‘hoping it would get better or that he would want to get serious’*. However, Kim took a step of responsibility through dealing with the feelings that come after casual sex, as she *‘train[ed], desensitise[d] and programme[d] herself to block off the feelings that come after sexual relations’*. In this article, the writer presents the opinions of the two girls while she left the solution for the reader to decide on her own. Thus, this category encourages the reader to be independent and strong when making her decision since she is the one who is responsible for

the choices she makes in her own life. In addition, the writer is aware of the different social and cultural beliefs of the Malaysian society, and hence to avoid sensitive cultural issues for the topic of casual sex, she left the solution in the article for the reader to draw her own conclusion by presenting two possible solutions.

In the Middle Eastern women's magazines, this category appears to be the most prominent solution category for these magazines since it is found in ten articles. In the article, "Marital Porn\_ Is Watching Porn the Real Deal Breaker?" (WW), for example, which is basically an account of the unreliability of a husband who secretly watches porn, the writer provides two different solutions under the solution categories 'Rejection' and 'Pleasing People' as discussed earlier. Yet, the writer presents a third piece of advice, which is, "... *ask yourself this, if the roles were reversed and it was you hiding out in the bathroom in the middle of the night – would you expect him to leave you?*". It seems that the writer indirectly trivialises the issue of watching porn and urges a woman to rationally think about her decision before taking any step such as *divorce*, which means she is responsible for drawing her own decision from the possibilities of solutions presented in the text, since she has the power to decide on the choices she makes in her life. Similar to the Malaysian women's magazines finding, it is worth noting that the writer may use this solution in order to avoid sensitive socio-cultural issues, such as watching porn. It hence seems that this solution encourages women to become more independent and confident through making their own choices. This new trend of giving advice may change the traditional ways of giving advice in women's magazines.

### ***Forgiveness of yourself and/or others***

In this solution category, which we have found only in the Middle Eastern data, women who may face problems, especially with men, are advised to stop the feeling of anger and hurt towards themselves and others in order to sustain good relationships with others, and to release the hurt and the blame and hence have a happy life. Releasing the negative emotions of resentment, anger, indignation, and guilt towards others or oneself through forgiveness paves the way for developing positive emotions such as happiness, joy, contentment, love and peace (Friedman 2), and hence, it is worth noting that this new solution category can be categorised under the solution category 'Pleasing Oneself'. On the other hand, forgiveness is a conscious choice as a person has the freedom of *choosing and deciding to forgive* (Friedman 2). Therefore, this new category can also be categorised under the solution category 'Taking Responsibility' since the person is responsible for her choice of releasing unpleasant emotions. However, it is worth categorising this new solution under a separate category because this behaviour of forgiveness is found only in the Middle Eastern women's magazines. It appears in two articles, which are, "How to Let Go of Past Relationships" and "Second-Chance Love". It appears as a solution for the former article and as a subordinate solution category for the latter where 'Taking Responsibility' is the main solution category. This category is expressed by the actual use of the word 'forgiveness'; by the noun '*Forgiveness*', and the verb '*forgive*', as demonstrated in the following quotes "*Forgiveness, of yourself and others, is also key to letting go of the past. Refusing to forgive can be a major obstacle to happiness*", "...when she wrote the letters and she

*found a way to forgive, seek positively, and simply find a reason to laugh every day”, and “You need to forgive your ex of past mistakes and decide to love them unconditionally, otherwise you will always be replaying the same cycles of disappointment”.*

This category only happens in the Middle Eastern women's magazines probably due to cultural and religious reasons; in the context of culture, the Arabs have a tradition of forgiveness which is an important value that elders have traditionally used to encourage certain behaviours of tolerance (Abu-Nimer 44), and in the context of religion where this conservative society depends heavily on Islamic teachings (Khimish 132), forgiveness is considered as an important value in Islamic tradition, and hence, the notion of forgiveness is also derived from their religious identity (Abu-Nimer and Nasser 490).

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

This study found that all of Machin and Van Leeuwen's solution categories are found in our data. However, the solution category 'Taking Control' is not found in the Middle Eastern context. In addition, our study also found four new solution categories, namely, 'Pleasing Oneself', 'Acquiring Knowledge', 'Taking Responsibility', and 'Forgiveness'. This suggests that Machin and Van Leeuwen's 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*" ("Global Schemas" 508), may not necessarily be true as far as locally-produced women's magazines are concerned.

This study also supports Machin and Van Leeuwen's findings that this problem-solution discourse schema allows for variations in terms of the types of problems and solutions it can accommodate. That is, the socio-cultural, political and religious beliefs of the three parts of the world studied reflect the types of solutions appearing in the articles, as shown earlier. In general, it is apparent from our data analysis that even though there are variations in the definitions and contextualisation of each solution category in the three contexts, as discussed above, the overall *aim* of these articles is similar. That is, to help women achieve certain life goals such as freedom, independence, sexual satisfaction, confidence, and others, as supported by Machin and Van Leeuwen's point of view. In relation to this, the findings of this study also conform to Machin and Van Leeuwen's findings that the construction of the magazines articles' content is 'increasingly localised' even though they all follow the structure of problem-solution genre ("Global Media"). In their study, Machin and Van Leeuwen look at representations of women at work in several international editions of *Cosmopolitan*. They believe that the different contents in these magazines reflect differences in the readership as well as differences in the cultural and economic backgrounds of the countries.

The findings of this study also suggest that frames of femininity are polarised to form two images of women: a traditional feminine image of women and a modern, independent, and empowered image of women. This idea is supported by other scholars, such as Farvid and Braun; Gill; and Machin and Thornborrow. As pointed

out by Winship, this suggests the contradictory nature of women's magazines that encourage women to stand up for their rights and to be more independent, but at the same time, messages on women's passiveness and their traditional roles are still observed. Such an idea aligns with McCracken's view that women's magazines present a contradictory world and they are unsuccessful in providing women with a coherent model for living.

With regards to the traditional feminine image of women, it is observed in our data that there is an obsession with men in the women's magazines studied, where men are implicitly depicted as the source of women's happiness and sexual fulfilment, and hence, women are depicted as needing men in their lives. This idea is supported by other scholars such as Benson and Whitaker and Gauntlett. In addition, women are perceived as naïve and are in need of basic information and knowledge about men, as shown in the solution category 'Acquiring Knowledge', which we have found from the data we obtained, for example, as appeared in the articles "4 Things You Never Knew About Men and Sex" (HW), and "10 Ways to Know if your Guy is Really Ambitious" (WW).

Women receive messages that it is their responsibility to guide or help men to deal with relationships, and it is the women's responsibility to improve, maintain and sustain good relationships with their partners, as observed by other scholars such as Gupta et al. and Gill. In addition, they are also depicted as being uncertain about sex and relationships; thus, they constantly need advice on how to talk, behave, and form relationships, similar to Gill's theme 'Men-ology'. For example, "*Turn to your partner*" and "*Don't overanalyse*" (AH). In another example, "*Stop picking fights about things you don't really care about*" and "*Apologize when you know you're wrong*" (MC). They also often receive messages that they are responsible for men's sexual pleasures, as they receive instructions on sex, for the purpose of understanding and satisfying their men's sexual desires or needs. This was also observed by other scholars such as Farvid and Braun and Gupta et al. This reinforces the traditional roles of women which include male sexual priority and the expectation that women have to do all the hard work on their own. For example, "*Create a sexy playlist*", "*Read Erotica*", and "*Playing with food: 10 Things You Must Try For Mind-Blowing Sex*" (HW). However, it is noted that this message of satisfying men's needs is not found in the Middle Eastern data due to restrictions on sexual contents in the Middle Eastern media as mentioned earlier. In addition, women also receive messages on enhancing their own sexual pleasures and to be empowered, as found in the solution category 'Taking Control'. However, these messages are still framed within the traditional role of women as they seem to be mainly connected to their body and sexuality, and their ability to please men. This idea is also supported by Machin and Thornborrow ("*Branding and Discourse*").

The traditional view of women in these magazines is reinforced in the solution category 'Pleasing People', where women are advised to make others, especially the men in their lives, the priority of their lives by paying attention to their feelings rather than their own feelings, as shown in the article "Marital Porn\_ Is Watching Porn the Real Deal Breaker?" (WW) earlier, where women are advised to make their family a priority before thinking about *divorce* when they discover their partner's unreliability. Hence, women are advised to be more logical when it

comes to the future of their families, as any negative decision means '*breaking up a whole family*'. Thus, women are expected to be more logical and less emotional in dealing with any problems, as similarly observed by Gupta et al.

In contrast to the view of women discussed above, women in these articles are also constructed with another image, that is, as someone who is active, independent and empowered in the data studied, as revealed in studies by Kauppinen and Machin and Thornborrow ("Lifestyle and the Depoliticisation of Agency"). This contradictory views of women can even be found within the same article, as in the article "Marital Porn\_ Is Watching Porn the Real Deal Breaker?" (WW) where two opposite solutions are proposed, namely, 'Rejection' and 'Pleasing People'.

The idea of independence and empowerment can clearly be seen in the solution category 'Taking Responsibility', which we have found, where women have the right to decide on their own lifestyle, in the domain of sex and relationships. This finding goes beyond the traditional nature of advice in women's magazines where women are instructed on following certain tips and instructions provided by the writer. However, the way of presenting such messages vary across the three contexts studied due to socio-cultural differences.

The US women's magazines seem to promote independent women whose priority is to experience a sexually fulfilling life rather than focusing on marriage, which supports Crusmac's finding on the Romanian edition of *Cosmopolitan*. For example, having a pregnant friend or a baby is even viewed as problematic for those young women, as featured in the articles "Why It's Completely OK If You Don't Like Babies", and "How to Handle Your Best Friend Getting Pregnant". Women are seen as sexually active and independent with the right to desire sex. They also have the right of 'Rejection' for any relationship which results in their 'Sexual Dissatisfaction', and the right of 'Taking Control' to overcome 'Sexual Dissatisfaction'. However, 'Taking Control' in these articles can be viewed from two opposing perspectives. It can be framed as 'taking control' of sexual problems in order to satisfy their men, hence reinforcing the traditional role of women, as espoused earlier. On the other hand, it can be framed as a solution women may take to overcome their sexual problems in order to satisfy themselves rather than their men, as featured in the article "How to Destroy Your 6 Biggest Orgasm Obstacles" (CP), where women are advised to acquire skills and to take control for achieving their sexual fulfilment. This finding supports Machin and Thornborrow's idea that sex is used in women's magazines as power, choice, and a lifestyle that is used to challenge previous traditional regimes ("Lifestyle and the Depoliticisation of Agency"). Women are also encouraged to communicate with their men to solve specific problems pertaining to sex and relationships, which promotes gender equality where women have the same right as men to share their thoughts, and their sexual needs and fantasies. They also have the right to please themselves and make themselves a priority, as found in our new solution category 'Pleasing Oneself'. Hence, women's rights to pleasure may result in a sense of empowerment which is linked to control and agency, as supported by Kauppinen.

In the Malaysian data, women are constructed as active and confident with the right of 'Communication' with their men about their sexual needs and fantasies, and about other social matters, which helps them to overcome gender role obstacles where in this patriarchal society women still occupy a secondary position in their community (Abdullah 88). They also have the right to please themselves and to transform their feelings about sex as they are advised to become sexually adventurous and to try something new, as shown earlier in the article "5 Tricks to Spice Up Your Sex Life" (HW). However, this freedom of exploring alternatives for actual sexual intercourse is given under the context of marriage, unlike the US data which encourage women to have sexual experiences before marriage. Women are also responsible for their lifestyle, pertaining to sex and relationships, and this constructs women as having power and agency to get what they want through their own decisions. However, it seems that 'Taking Responsibility' for Malaysian women relates not only to agency but also to socio-cultural issues as mentioned earlier. That is, the writers are aware of these issues in the Malaysian society, and hence, they indirectly advise women to be in power by challenging the traditional beliefs of society and to stand by their decisions.

In the Middle Eastern context, women are also constructed as being independent since they are informed that they have the right to reject any relationship, the right to communicate and negotiate with men in order to develop or maintain a relationship, and their right to communicate with their men (and others) about their first sexual encounters. For example, *"Practical tips for losing your virginity...Be patient and communicate with each other...To avoid first day failures or disappointments"*: "Tips for a Pleasant First Time..." (WW). They also have the right to please themselves to overcome the issue of being single, as they are encouraged to be happy and to find alternatives for the feeling of being an outcast in society. In addition, women have the right to take responsibility and to decide on their own; and similar to the Malaysian context, it seems that 'Taking Responsibility' is implicitly provided in the articles to avoid sensitive socio-cultural issues. In this case, the Middle Eastern data constructs women with power and agency needed to defend their own rights and to decide on their own lifestyle, which implicitly encourages them to challenge their traditional roles imposed by their society. Thus, even though messages of empowerment vary across the three contexts, nevertheless the ideas of independence and agency are promoted in all of the contexts.

In general, regardless of the contradictory nature of the women's magazines studied as noted earlier, it can be argued that the main focus of these magazines is to empower women and encourage responsibility and independence, as reflected in my new solution categories, specifically, 'Taking Responsibility', 'Pleasing Oneself', and 'Forgiveness' as well as the overall data from my study. It can be argued that the depiction of women as empowered individuals might be expected in contemporary women's magazines since these publications invariably reflect changes in attitudes towards women and their role in society. Thus, it can be argued that women are empowered in contemporary women's magazines but within a traditional framework.



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