# CHANGES IN WOMEN'S PROTRAYAL IN ADVERTISEMENT

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## Abstract

In this paper, the authors intend to investigate how women have been exploited in the world of mass media, particularly in this study, the advertising field. Numerous studies have surfaced in the past concerning this above issue, where researchers have published their statistics on the treatment of women in advertisements, which is by exploiting superficial qualities or characteristics of the female gender, merely for chasing profits and increasing value to male audiences. Common conscience would see that this is something which is shameful and should eventually be stopped. The society, as a whole, desperately needs to push for portrayal of women in advertisements to be more ethical, account for higher moral standards and help young women discover their talents, while rightfully receiving the recognition they deserve. From the findings of interviews conducted to a sample of respondents in Malaysia, it has been able to provide a localized perspective of this issue. Its findings serve to inform on the progress of women's portrayal in Malaysia's media. Also in the study, the authors will peg these issues surrounding women treatment to how a reform towards our education system can become a major step towards the obliteration of negative treatment of women in their careers.

**Keywords:** *exploitation, implications to education system, portrayal of women*

## Introduction

Advertisements play a vital role in today's commerce as it directly influences consumers' buying decisions. This is stated by Kotler as one of the main functions of advertising, which is to stimulate sales and push profit levels higher for a product or several products at a specific length of time (as cited in Svetlana, 2014). Advertisements are proven to be successful when it brings in more revenue in a certain period of time due to factors like market awareness. However, in the recent decade, the pressure to one-up against competition and deliver improvements in every quarterly results have seen a dramatic increase. To achieve these goals, advertising agencies or advertising departments resort to cheap and disgraceful tactics, one of the major ones being the exploitation of women. When women are portrayed in advertisements, they should receive a correct type of portrayal that strikes a balance between modesty and attractiveness. In a study by Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976) (as cited in Nagi, 2014), they found that major magazines, including the likes of Newsweek, Times and the New Yorker, often used women in decorative roles, or in other words, roles which do not imply a significant impact to the society. In fact, we can also see a lack of ethics in women's portrayal in advertisements, where men have dominated top positions, dictating how the advertisements should be produced for the public eye. Portrayal of women in advertisements should account for higher moral standards to avoid

 objectifying women for their sexuality, to promote professionalism and to aid the progress of women with distinctive talents.

**Findings and Discussions**
*Demographics*
The interview was conducted against a total of 40 respondents, which comprised of 26 women and 14 men. Most of the respondents aged between 20 to 55 years old. The interview was conducted in an informal manner, to obtain opinions regarding the portrayal of women in advertisements. It includes questions such as how often does one see women being used in advertisements to how they feel after watching such advertisements.

*Responses' Statistics and Analysis*
In conducting the interviews, the key information which had to be first obtained would be to know where were the advertisements consumed by the respondents. This was particularly important to have a rough idea of the format of the advertisements. Television advertisements are usually higher budgeted and aim to captivate a larger target audience due to the wider range of audiences' ages. Results from the interviews were tabulated and quantified into percentages below.
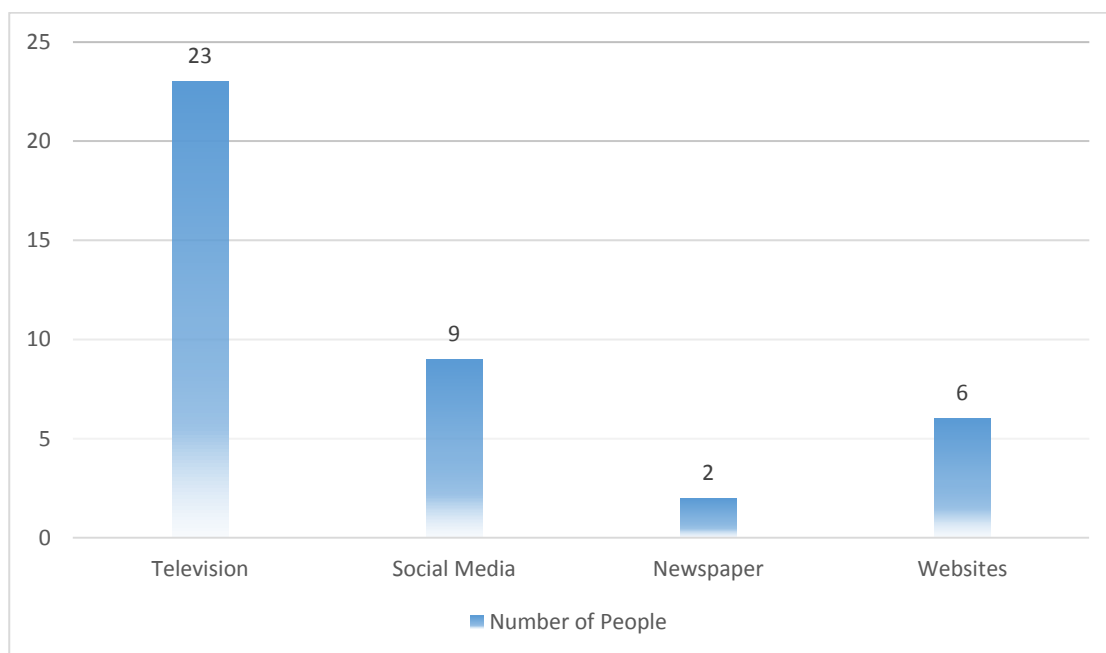


Figure 1. *How advertisements are consumed.*

Among all the respondents, the majority group (57.5%) watched advertisements normally on a television. This helps put into perspective that most advertisements are consumed in between television programs, which further can be assumed with family members. The second major group (22.5%) was the social media. Social media has sought into popularity in the last decade, while advertisers have resorted to various methods to serve advertisements in social media's news feed etc.
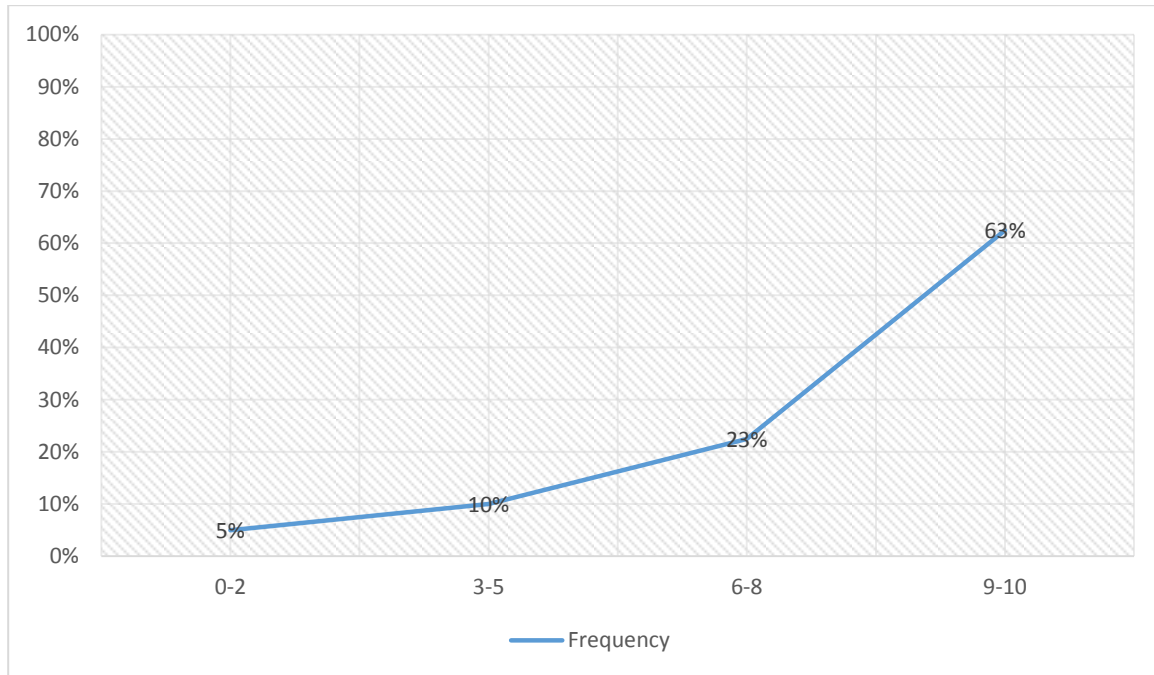
Figure 2. *Frequency of female models usage in advertisements.*

On the topic of how often female models appeared in advertisements, respondents were asked the frequency of such occurrences. Out of the last 10 ads, 32 out of 40 respondents stated that they appeared 6-10 times. This is an overwhelming agreement and showed that women are a common use in advertising.
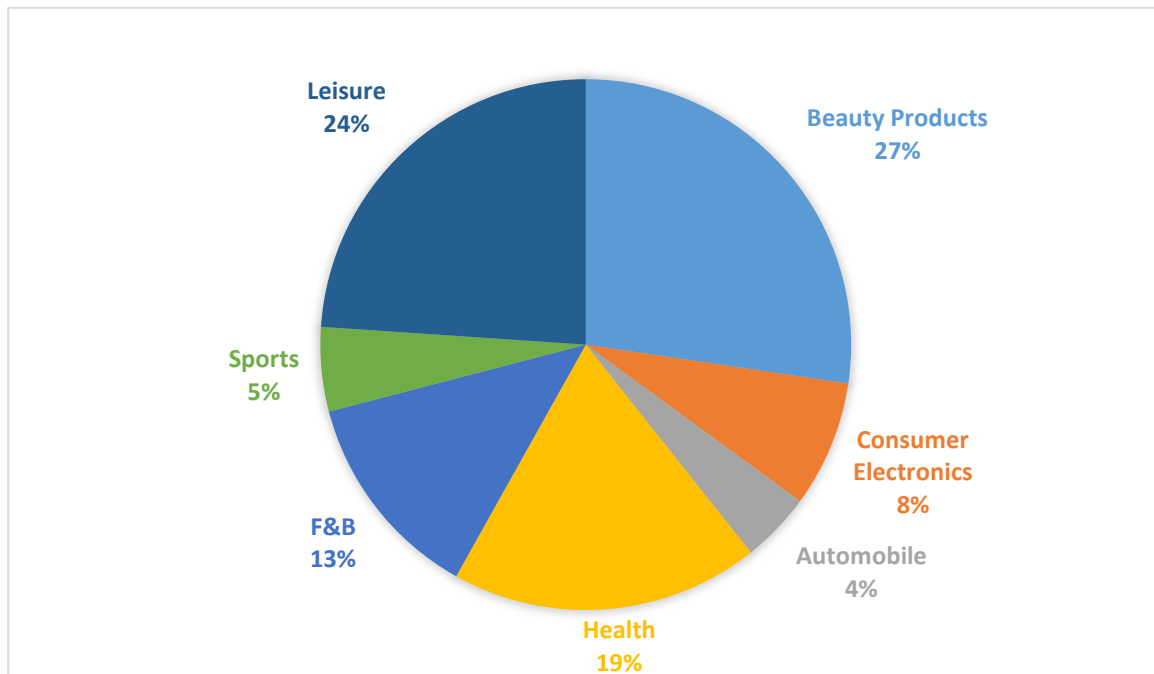


Figure 3. *Female models usage in the industry.*

Next, the interview touched on which industries were most often seen using females in their adverts. The findings found as per Figure 3, that the major categories were beauty products, leisure and entertainment and health products. In a following question, it was close to equal number of respondents felt that their dressings were

either provocative or decent. Out of the respondents who found the models provocative, they believed that it was effective but do not agree that females should be exploited this way (62.5%). There were also some respondents (15.75%) who thought that females were fine to be exploited as long as it delivered better effectiveness in getting the product's popularity to increase. However, most respondents (80%) agreed that icons like Dato' Vida gained much fame due to how she portrays herself on television, not necessary for her dressing. In fact, they agreed that in the Muslims' media, most models are covering themselves and the respondents are fine with this changes because they understand the religion's teachings. However, as we know, the multi-racial country of Malaysia has also the non-Muslims' media. Therefore, this was where the respondents felt that advertisements still exploited women in that range of media content. The exploitation of women in these advertisements could have the potential to affect how women are treated by the community at large. From the 40 respondents, many felt that in a direct or indirect manner (55%), women had received a certain amount of discrimination or stereotyping due to the portrayal in media.

In regards to suggestions provided by the respondents, they believed that women should be portrayed by first, showing them doing technical work rather than motherly work like housework etc. Secondly, they should show more intelligence, in terms of their responses to daily events. Thirdly, they should move away from mostly promoting fashion-related brands and products, instead going wider range across all kinds of consumer products. Furthermore, respondents suggested that women should continue to be portrayed by not what they wear but what they do. They believed the progress made in Malaysia has been great in terms of having more models cover themselves, which leads to improving the perception of beauty. It also proves that the Muslims are protected and Muslim image is widely accepted in the public sphere. Lastly, respondents felt that in order for women to be treated well, the directors of the advertisements should focus on making people see the capable side of women who can handle tasks and live independent of men's control or appeal.

## Women in Advertisement Issues
### *To avoid from objectifying women for their sexuality*
The female role portrayed by advertising should be shifted from objectifying women as sex objects. In recent times, the media has invented a stereotypical women's image, where its main function is to attract consumers by their sexuality. Women in modern advertisements are usually dressed with lesser clothing to show off their body parts. Often times, women are forced to perform dangerous and uncomfortable acts to gain more attention. Conservatives and feminists usually holds protests against this uprising trend. According to an on-the-road research for her novel, Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture (2005) (as cited in Berberick, 2010), Ariel Levy spent time with the people behind Girls Gone Wild, a popular adult entertainment line, where she found that young girls were persuaded to take off their clothes in order to receive their introduction into the industry. The above phenomenon has provided a solid case that advertising clearly contributes to the gender inequality by promoting sexism and distort body image ideals of women in the media.

Moreover, portrayal of women in advertisements should be able to attract people through their feminine qualities instead of their seductiveness. Factually, ads often depict the women as sex objects to be admire7d by men for their sake, especially in ads for health and beauty products. For example, the female model in a particular

perfume ad would be a sexy woman. In this advert, she is clinging to a rugged man. Although the female model has agreed to the set-up, the implication is clear that she could not have caught him without the product's help. The role of women in advertisements should appeal to a woman's sense of well-being for her own sake, not to enhance her status as a sex object. Furthermore, the advertiser should be able to present positive female role models in a dignified manner, which will result in higher self-esteem and encourage the cognition of female potential. For example, a woman can be shown to possess the skill of attentiveness and carefulness, which counteracts the careless stereotype the society has planted on women. Following from that, the woman with the above feminine qualities would achieve success in life due to her care for attention and patience, instead of being viewed as slower than others and irrelevant to the society. Portrayal of women in this respect will be a starting step to an eventual restart of people's prejudgements on women's qualities in the society.

The exploitation of women such as revealing female body parts should not be used solely for the pleasure of men. Over the years, sexuality has an impact on one's identity, self-esteem, societal moral, legal code and so on. The effect often leads to the crime waves which jeopardize people's life constantly. Women have been principally defined by their roles as sexual beings which main purpose is to attract male audiences or solely for the organization's profit. Thus, it is very important for the main leaders in the industry to possess Islamic principle in their management. Islam has strictly opposed from women being displayed in improper dress as stated in Al-Qur'an,

> And say to the believing women, that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands their fathers, their husband's 'fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male attendants free of sexual desires, or small children who have no carnal knowledge of women (Surah An-Nur, 24:31).

With this, we can infer that Islam has laid out clear and easily understandable guidelines for how a women should dress and portray themselves. Every woman has the right to be respected and portrayed in the dignified way. They play an important position within the society to set moral standards concerning what is right and wrong to do.

### *To promote professionalism towards parties of both genders in the advertising industry*

The advertising industry is traditionally proven to be a strong influence, not only to the society at large, but also to the politics and economy of a country. This makes the content of the advertisements to be considered with high sensitivity. However, recent trends contradict that principle, especially through the unequal treatment towards women in the advertising industry. As a matter of fact, women have become the default tool to make successful advertisements. Issues surrounding women in the advertising industry has a lot to do with the decreasing level of professionalism. To overcome this problem, professionalism among agencies in the industry should be heavily promoted in order to bring balance to the treatment of women.

Nowadays, without looks, a woman would not be able to break into the market in the advertising industry. We can blame this on the agencies, which demand superficial qualities in the women used in their content. Morally, it is disgraceful that

this is taking place when humanity should be based on individual strengths and skills, considering that the 21st century place high importance for any individual to differentiate themselves from one another. For example, women are used in automobile-related advertisements in a sensuous manner, as Nagi (2014) noted that "sex sells pretty more than anything" (p.85). Even though this scene is not relevant to the product, but the exploitation is done anyway to attract more attention. Instead, they should be promoting women who possess skills related to the advertisement, in this case, a female racer or stunt driver.

Furthermore, agencies should consist of high-ranking creative directors who are women. Even though women in advertising departments outnumbers men, but the creative department is still a boys' club. In fact, Kestin (1998) (as cited in Broyles & Grow, 2008) noted that when women enter a meeting with the men, men cannot help it but immediately make assumptions and discriminate a woman's ability. This is due to their inability to look beyond the benefits women can bring in these positions. In actual fact, with the incorporation of women in the creative department, advertisements can be represented in a different perspective and provide higher assurance of equal respect among genders in the industry. Additionally, the work environment would improve with a gender-balance spread of individuals.

### *To aid the progress of women with distinctive talents*
Female representation in advertisement should be focused to aid the progress of women with distinctive talent. While advertising misrepresents women's traits such as jobless, maternal, childlike, seductive, dependent on man and so on. Matud, Rodriguez and Espinosa study on Spanish daily newspapers (2010), and Arima's study on Japanese television advertisements (2003) (as cited in Yang, 2010) found that sexism towards women was highly encouraged on magazine and television advertising. Yang, (2010) further emphasizes "women tend to be portrayed either in a degrading or demeaning fashion or in sex-role stereotypic behaviors" (p.9). This clearly shows that one significant issue that advertisements are infamously known through images is how the ideal beauty of a woman and her body should look like. In consequence, many women are conscious about their beauty and weight. This concept has highlighted the wrongdoings of making women as mere element to attract mass audience which degrades the prestige of women.

Moreover, there are many circumstances where men dominate the top positions in the advertising industry with their conservative ideas regarding what product to sell. For instance, men in the working world are portrayed to be well versed in their jobs whilst women are shown as subordinates within an organization. Eisend (2010), Tsichla and Zotos (2013) discussed that gender stereotyping have confined women's opportunities to explore their potentials that may lead to the deficiency in professionalism. For that matter, women should be allowed to voice out.

There are many young women who can provide dynamism to the wash-rinse-repeat formula of the industry. Women are underrepresented in advertisements because most of them focus mainly on the woman's body instead of other things that make up who they are. In addition, female identity in advertising can be positively presented by encouraging the women's potential instead of their attractiveness.

### Implications to the Education System
Women's treatment in advertisement treads back to the very importance to reform education as it is today's era, while being so advanced but an irony to still be having

debates on how to obliterate gender inequality. An education system which is gender-unbiased and gender-equal would go a long way in setting up an efficient working class in the near future.

The most evident problem we face in women's involvement in the education system is the discrimination they received during group activities. Often, female students in their tertiary courses, especially when they had chosen the path to pursue male-dominated courses, their roles in group activities often are marginally reduced, taking up fringe roles or in other words, become an overall 'ornament' of the team. However, it is fair to say that sometimes the work of students from male-dominated courses like engineering has grown mundane due to the lack of a different perspective and in need of refreshing ideas. This is exactly the reason for female students to start leading teams in order for works in these fields to have a broader horizon compared to the traditional environment.

Role models play a crucial role in motivating the students of all ages to embark onto their interests and passions, especially during the younger ages (as cited in Coppock, 2009). In fact, for girls, role models can have a larger impact to them compared to boys. These role models could be their parents or teachers. In the context of the education system, instead of viewing them as incapable to match the males, the educators must actively encourage female participation in traditionally-viewed male dominance fields like ICT or engineering. Besides, it is an often a myth that women are not able to perform as well as their male counterparts. It is the content of the subject, which has in the past, put too much of an emphasis on technical topics like programming (as cited in Joyce, 2009), while sidelining creative related skills like graphic design, which is arguably showing positive growth in this "Packaging of a product triumphs all priorities" trend. If educators continue to only emphasize the technical aspects of male-dominated courses, then it will deter women from taking them up during their tertiary-level education even if they possessed the interest in ICT.

In any level of education, educators must keep a consistent drive to incorporate all genders into discussions of all types. This is an invaluable step because the female counterpart must know that their opinions matter to the society, and their opinions would be taken into account instead of being immaterial. In fact, this is not without proof. In countries like Tanzania, immense efforts are put towards promoting female participation in the societal and political spheres (as cited in SADEV, 2010).

Lastly, it is important that the office bearers of our education systems remove their prejudiced treatment towards women as only needed for minor roles or have futures in supportive careers. It has been found that in developing countries, in every 100 men, 98 women enrolled in tertiary education. However, most of them are over-represented in humanities and social sciences, but severely under-represented in engineering, science and technology (as cited in Karam, 2013). The truth is women might not need to approach those technical courses like their male counterparts. It is a fact that women can contribute to the society, when exposed to fields like ICT in the right manner, and proven that they could do a better job of serving people in need than men, who are often technically-focused. Women who have excelled as leaders in tech companies is no short list too, with the likes of Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo, Susan Wojcicki, CEO of video consumption website, Youtube, and in politics, recently Theresa May as Britain's current Prime Minister.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, women should not be exploited as sex objects to attract male target audiences. Universal values such as justice, equality, freedom of speech and women's

right should be practiced in marketing industry to encourage positive result. It is believed that advertising cultivates the view of the world. A more inclusive depiction of women would set up a brighter stage for younger women.

Misrepresentation of women in advertising has led to the impact on violence and social abuse of women. One of the ways to avoid it is for women to be portrayed in a dignified manner by being decently dressed. More important to note, exploitation of women has been strictly forbidden in Islam. Women should be protected and not to be used in immoral ways in advertisement. Meanwhile, advertisers or stakeholders should be able to promote Islamic values in advertisements, as it is very crucial in guiding the advertising board to produce credible advertisement. The aim of advertisement is not only to persuade people to buy the product but also to provide valuable information for audiences. It is high time that audiences learn and practice to understand the meaning behind messages delivered.

In our findings, it can be concluded that in Malaysia's advertising media, much progress has been made especially the Muslim media. Most Muslims agreed that the overall external impression delivered by Muslim models has been on an uprising trend towards modesty true to the teachings of Islam, which is by covering their aurat. The key takeaway is that advertisements can thrive without exploiting the superficial qualities of a woman, proven by numerous successful advertising campaigns in Malaysia. The western world, while on the opposite side of the planet from the Muslim-majority Southeast Asian region, but they should start making significant steps away from the female-exploiting practices.

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