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The overweight female body in Malaysian slimming advertisements: problem and solution

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ABSTRACT
This study analyses image and text to investigate the way slimming advertising exploits women’s fear of being overweight to the extent that they feel obliged to do something about their own bodies. We show how Malaysian slimming advertisements construct certain types of female body which reinforce cultural stereotypes, namely the overweight body that exceeds culturally acceptable limits of desirable body size, and the desirable and attainable slim body with no excess fat. Three sample advertisements were selected from a Malaysian English newspaper and analysed using Jewitt and Oyama’s framework to identify the way images and text are used to give specific meanings relating to the female body. The images were examined in terms of representational, interactional and compositional meanings, and the analysis provides evidence of how the extremely overweight female body is pathologised, making it the focus of critical scrutiny. The advertisements use body images to illustrate the problem of being very overweight and the desirability of being slim, and the consumption of slimming services as a quick and easy solution to the problem.

KEYWORDS
Slimming advertisements; female body image; overweight body; visual social semiotics; critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction
Images of increasingly thin women have in recent decades been presented in the media, body fat being framed “as a signifier of excessiveness, being out of control, a devaluation of the feminine individual morality needing earthly discipline” (Dworkin and Wachs 2004, 611). Research in western contexts has shown that unrealistic beauty standards promoted by airbrushed and surgically enhanced models have influenced women’s images of their bodies, and created body dissatisfaction (Clark and Tiggemann 2006). Women are consequently more inclined to practise unhealthy weight-loss behaviours, including obsessive dieting (Byely et al. 2000), extreme exercise and the use of weight-loss products and treatments (Tsai 2000). The body is disciplined through weight-loss products and technologies to overcome self-perceived flaws and construct a beautiful self (see e.g. Featherstone 2009), rather than for health and well-being.

The female body is a prime site for the media in general and advertisers in particular to address problems that we “haven’t always known we have” (Rhode 2010, 8), for example, by exaggerating the importance of thinness and exerting pressure to be thin. The insidious
power of the thin ideal is clearly reflected in the choices that women make in terms of their bodies, subjecting them to “regimes of maintenance via consumption of a variety of marketed goods” (Malacrida and Low 2010, 305). There are significant relationships between exposure to female images in the media, particularly commercial advertising, and problems associated with dieting, eating disorders and related psychological dysfunctions (see e.g. Davis 1995; Owen and Laurel-Seller 2001; Caqueo-Urízar et al. 2011).

There has been little research on the oppressive ideology of the thin ideal promoted in the media or advertising in Malaysia and its effects on women, for example, eating problems, low self-esteem, and the consumption of slimming products (Mellor et al. 2009). A survey conducted by the Nielsen Company shows that Malaysian women are equally concerned with weight problems. Of the 500 interviewed, 48% thought they were overweight and 58% wished to lose weight (http://my.acnielsen.com/news/20090122.shtml, accessed 7/12/2010). These findings are supported by Lukman (2010), whose survey showed that 65% of young Malaysian girls between 13 and 16 wanted to be thin, and 10% were at risk of eating disorders. The recent mushrooming of slimming centres in Malaysia points to the increasing demand for slimming services; and like their Western counterparts, Malaysian women are susceptible to the ideology of the thin ideal and to the need for beauty work associated with the rise of consumerism. Slimming centres in Malaysia sell diet products, and are the main providers of weight-loss treatments and programmes, including body contouring and firming.

According to Wykes and Gunter (2005, 9), despite a strong critique of the media for promoting the thin ideal, there is a lack of research on “the nature of media representations of the body”. This article aims to fill the gap by examining how the extremely overweight female body is depicted in Malaysian slimming advertisements. The issue addressed is the perceived problem associated with being very overweight, and the corresponding claims to have found a solution to attain the ideal body. Many researchers have analysed textual material “to identify the ways in which fat embodiment is portrayed and the meanings conveyed to audiences of such texts” (Lupton 2013, 25). Others have concentrated on media images, investigating, for example, the effect of idealised female images on women’s body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann and McGill 2004), self-esteem (Smith 2000), and self-image (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). This article analyses not only visual images but also texts in the specific contexts of slimming advertisements. It adopts a multimodal approach to discourse analysis (see Kress 2012), in order to find out how they are used to associate specific meanings with overweight female bodies, and create a need for slimming services to deal with the problem of being overweight beyond culturally acceptable limits of body size.

A broader perspective of discourse is required (LeVine and Scollon 2004), because contemporary advertisements tend to be multimodal, combining visual, and verbal modes to convey a message to change the behaviour of the viewer (Cook 2001). From this perspective, meanings are derived from the intertextual relationships between these two modes, namely how they work in relation to each other in the specific context of slimming advertising. Intertextuality, which for Rose (2007, 142) “refers to the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts”, is important to understand how meanings are communicated in discourse through multimodality.
Preliminary investigation of a corpus of 100 slimming advertisements collected for this study showed that the target female audience is positioned as consumers not only of the slimming services advertised but also of the beauty ideal promoted and presented as attainable through their use. Richardson and Locks (2014, x) argue that “in our hypermediated society we are constantly assailed with media images – especially advertisements – so that we internalise these ‘ideals’ and either attempt to conform to them or resist them”; but many, especially women, tend to conform to the thin ideal image because of the stigma and discrimination associated with being fat (Rhode 2010, 42). “Fearing negative responses to fat …”, many of the women that Rice (2014, 6) interviewed “describe how they altered or concealed the unacceptable to avoid judgement and rejection”.

2. Slimming advertising and the othering of fat

Images of beauty associated with the use of certain products are constant reminders of the need for self-improvement and body modification to achieve the desirable look (see e.g. Orbach 1978). As part of its marketing strategy, slimming advertising exploits this sense of inadequacy, encouraging overweight people to lose weight and then identifies “a convenient commercial cure” to deal with the problem of excess weight (see e.g. Rhode 2010). This way of thinking which promotes the assumptions that our ideals of beauty are easily attainable “draws on the myths of perfection detached from biological and social realities” (Rhode 2010, 67). In her critique of this kind of advertising, Rhode (2010, 67) asserts that “The ads sound empowering, but the effect is nothing but”.

The fat body is pathologised as a “spoiled identity” associated with ill health and poor behaviour, and lacking self-control (Kent 2010, 368). The emphasis that weight control “is a matter of self-control and personal responsibility” suggests that people are overweight because they lack the self-control “to conform to normal standards of normal weight” (Lupton 2013, 41). Not surprisingly, when an overweight body appears in slimming advertisements, it becomes the focus of stigmatising discourses aiming to endorse and transmit ideological assumptions, namely that the overweight body needs “disciplining, normalizing and containing” (Lupton 2013, 3) to reduce the risks associated with being overweight. Slimming advertising encourages women to be critical of their bodies and create “a world in which individuals are made to become emotionally vulnerable, constantly monitoring themselves for bodily imperfections which could no longer be regarded as natural” (Featherstone 2001, 175).

Slimming advertising would not have much impact if society did not generally accept the ideology of the thin ideal, which Fairclough (2003, 9) conceptualises as a “modality of power”, a means by which asymmetrical power relations or domination are reproduced and maintained in a particular society. The ideal female images are “only a partial representation of the reality which we perceive, a reality which is intimately linked to social values and culture, a reality which is collectively constructed” (Spencer 2011, 13). The ideology of the thin ideal belongs to a social cultural system that devalues the fat body. Along the same lines, Wodak and Meyer (2001, 10) regard ideology as “an important aspect of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations”. The relationship of discourse to ideology can be seen in that “discourse embodies ideological assumptions which come to be taken as mere ‘common sense’, which contributes to sustaining existing power relations” (Fairclough 2004, 63) not through coercion but through consent, thus making it even more powerfully pervasive.
Fairclough (2003, 8) argues that “prolonged experience of such advertisements … contributes to shaping people’s identities as ‘consumers’ of their gender-identities”. In support of Fairclough’s (2003) position, Lee and Fung (2006, 11–15) assert that “body slimming is a mediated discourse that women as social actors produce and consume for the construction of their gendered identities”, and attaining a slim body can be equated with having “a false sense of self”, of beauty, diligence, graceful manners, self-control, and other fine qualities. The fear of being overweight serves as a form of social and psychological control for women (Stein 1981). If it goes unchecked and unchallenged, women will come to accept and internalise as a matter of common sense the ideology that “thin is good and fat is bad”. What is more serious is that body dissatisfaction can be excessive and can turn into “a preoccupation with an imagined defect in one’s appearance, a slight physical anomaly” (Veale 2004, 113).

3. Data and approach

A corpus of 100 slimming advertisements containing images and texts was collected from The Star, a Malaysian English language newspaper with the highest national readership and circulation. The advertisements were published between July 2007 and December 2008, and placed by well-known slimming centres in Malaysia, including Marie-France, Esthetika, Unisense, and Mayfair. They were categorised according to the following themes: celebrity endorsement, fat-to-slim transformation, post-natal, morbidly obese, medico-scientific methods, and weight-loss on reality shows. The three advertisements analysed as case studies were chosen from the morbidly obese category, each being given a title to reflect the core theme: (1) Rear view of the torso of an overweight woman (20 August 2008); (2) Overweight woman exercising on a treadmill (5 March 2008); and (3) Overweight woman and slim woman (22 September 2008). Advertisements 1 and 2 from Esthetika have images of overweight women as the main focus, while Advertisement 3 from Marie-France include a slim body and celebrity endorsement.

We adopt a social semiotic approach (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996) to multimodality to illustrate how semiotic resources are used to communicate meaning in the context of slimming advertising in mainstream newspapers (see e.g. van Leeuwen 2005, xi). Semiotic resources are defined as “the actions and artifacts we use to communicate” and their use in specific contexts is regulated by some form of semiotic regime (van Leeuwen 2005, 3). The approach is primarily concerned with issues of power and the ideological function of these contextualised semiotic resources.

Our focus is on the visual images, which are analysed using Jewitt and Oyama’s social semiotic visual analysis (2001), essentially drawn from Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) social semiotics model. Social semiotic visual analysis provides “a detailed and explicit method” and a set of analytical tools to enable us to describe more systematically the choices of visual features, and the way they are used in specific contexts to convey particular meanings (van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001, 3). According to Jewitt and Oyama (2001), social semiotic visual analysis involves “the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images … and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted” (Jewitt and Oyama 2001, 136). The meaning potential of the semiotic resources is dynamic, and they shape and are shaped by the concrete context subject to some form of semiotic regime (van Leeuwen 2005, 285).
The images are examined from a critical perspective with recourse to the accompanying text to demonstrate how images and language work together to make meaning for the readers with regard to undesirable female bodies. They are analysed in terms of representational, interactional and compositional meanings (van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001, 3), guided by three research questions: how the images are represented; how the represented images address the viewer; and how the resources of compositional meaning are used (van Leeuwen 2008). This scheme is adopted but in a different order, since we deal with the last question first.

Representational meaning is conveyed by the participants depicted, and a distinction can be made between narrative representation in which the participants are “doing” something or something is “happening”, and conceptual representation in which the participants are just “being” something. Jewitt and Oyama (2001, 141) regard the latter “as being something, or meaning something, or belonging to some category, or having certain characteristics or components”, and find a source of representational meaning in the “syntax” of the image, which is “a matter of spatial relationships, of ‘where things’ are in the semiotic space and of whether they are connected through lines, or through visual ‘rhymes’ of colour, shape…”. Connecting lines are also known as “vectors” (van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001, 141), which express “a dynamic ‘doing’ or ‘happening’ kind of relation”.

Interactional meaning is concerned with the way the image engages the viewer, and has three components. Firstly, contact exemplifies the dimension of social interaction according to whether or not the person in the image looks at the viewer (van Leeuwen 2008, 140). Eye contact signifies a demand for something from the viewer and the lack of eye contact indicates detachment, as though the person represented is a specimen in a display case. Secondly, social distance indicates “the closeness … of our relationships” (van Leeuwen 2008, 138). For example, “a close up shot suggests an intimate/personal relationship; a medium shot … suggests a social relationship …; and a long shot suggests an impersonal relationship” (Jewitt and Oyama 2001, 146). Thirdly, point of view relates to the angle from which the person is viewed, both horizontally (e.g. frontally or from the side) and vertically (e.g. from above, at eye level, or from below), and defines the kind of represented social relation between the viewer and the people in the picture: power and involvement (van Leeuwen 2008, 139).

Compositional meaning is conveyed through the use of four compositional resources. Firstly, information value is communicated through the positioning of elements in the composition “on the left or on the right, in the centre or the margin, or in the upper or lower part of the picture space or page” (Jewitt and Oyama 2001, 147–148). Items on the left are presented as “given” and those on the right as “new”. In the three advertisements, “given” seems to correspond to the target group of viewers, and “new” to information or advice being offered. Positioning relative to the top or bottom of the page corresponds to a scale from “ideal” to “real”; the ideal relates to the make-believe world of advertising copy and the real to company contact details. Secondly, framing refers to the identities given to the elements through colour contrast, absence of framelines, or empty space. Framing can connect items and show them belonging together, or disconnect them and represent them as items with separate identities. Thirdly, salience of representation refers to the degree to which items are “made more eye-catching than others”. Fourthly, modality indicates the extent to which the images can be thought of as true to reality.
4. Analysis

The advertisements selected for analysis use the “problem-solution approach” presenting the problem, that is, the overweight body, visually and verbally, and the solution as achievable. The analysis focuses on the main images relating to the female body with recourse to the directly associated textual material. This approach emphasises the importance of taking discourse analysis beyond linguistic observations, bringing into focus the visual dimension of communication which has been undervalued. In the context of beauty advertising, the images work with language to convey a particular message to a particular audience with the ultimate aim of getting them interested enough to buy. van Leeuwen (2008, 136) argues images “… give us the dreams of glamour of fulfilment …; the words give us the information we need …, the specifications of the products the addresses where we might buy it, the price”, and are “… constructs and their analysis must reveal the nature of these constructs” (van Leeuwen 2008, 5).

The images analysed are photographs of very overweight women portrayed in different ways: full torso back view in a tight top, exhausted while exercising, and a double helix blending overweight and slim female figures. The overweight female bodies are captured in a still photograph as objects specially chosen to illustrate that being overweight is an undesirable attribute. In Advertisement 3 an overweight body appears with a slim body to convey the message that overweight is incongruous with the thin ideal. Shapiro (1988, 124) argues that “of all modes of representation, [photography] is the one most easily assimilated into the discourses of knowledge and truth for it is thought to be … a copy of what we considered the ‘real’”. The reality is that the photographic images have been composed to tell a story which is not necessarily true, and which is at least exaggerated, drawing attention to “the appearance of the body, the clothing, the demeanour and gesture” (Kern 1975 as quoted in Featherstone 2001, 179). Photographs reinforce stereotypical forms of femininity which when expressed in words would probably be unacceptable, especially to women (Jewitt and Oyama 2001).

4.1 Rear view of the torso of an overweight woman

4.1.1 Compositional meaning

The top row, which is ideologically the most salient part of the message, contains as “given” the image of a very overweight woman on the left, and as “new” the promotional text on the right (Figure 1). These two elements are partially merged and joined by the headline, Are you living dangerously? stretched across, indicating that they belong together, and taking a central position in the advertising space as the nucleus of the information. The image of the woman’s back is the most salient element, occupying more than 60% of the semiotic space, and is made more conspicuous by the colour contrast of a dark figure against a light background. The headline set in large font and bold is positioned to draw attention to the fat back.

4.1.2 Representational meaning

The overweight woman is not doing anything, and is visually represented as “being” something, namely being frightfully overweight. There are no clues to suggest who she is or what she does. She is not presented as an individual, but rather as the stereotype of an
overweight woman. Her back is like an anatomical object in a medical textbook or on an obesity website. The photograph does not present an exact copy of what we would see in real life, because the effect is obviously achieved by exaggeration. The strings of her top have been pulled so tight that the rolls of flesh on her back meet along her spine like a cleavage, and her skirt is tightened to make the folds of flesh bulge at her waist. Her hair is pushed to the side to give a full view of the fat back, and her enormous arms are held away from her sides to reveal the bulges. This exaggeration of her fatness maximises the effect.

4.1.3 Interactional meaning
The woman is facing away from the camera, hiding her face perhaps in shame on account of her appearance (see e.g. Benin and Cartwright 2006). The lack of eye contact also suggests a lack of involvement, and is an important factor in presenting her as an object of scrutiny. The close-up shot at 90° makes us look into her back with a degree of intimacy inappropriate for someone who is a complete stranger.

4.1.4 Overall meaning
The viewer is invited to look closely at an exaggeratedly obese back placed in a salient position. This is a kind of visual metonymy, *pars pro toto*, in which the back – or more precisely the obesity – replaces a woman. The fat torso represents a category which includes any woman with surplus fat, and its positioning on the left indicates that the advertisement is targeting such women. But this impersonal image cannot be interpreted independently of the headline which personalises the reader, *Are you living dangerously?* running across it.

Figure 1. Rear view of the torso of an overweight woman.
Image and headline have to be interpreted together. On its own, the image shows a back and has nothing to do with lifestyle. On its own as a question, the headline can be answered yes or no, but the answer no is ruled out in the context of the image. Image and headline together suggest that “overweight women are living dangerously”. The framing of fat as dangerous foregrounds the negative messages about the health risks of fat. A woman who identifies with the category is presumably intended to infer “that’s how other people really see me, and I am living dangerously”. The body copy in a small font to the right echoes the same point but is virtually redundant. The image is unsightly and aesthetically displeasing, but the reference to danger in the headline concerns health. This is echoed in the juxtaposition of the words unhealthy and unsightly in the copy. In this way, health discourse is brought into slimming advertising.

The bold and capitalised copy entitled “You can’t run from fat” serves as a warning to women to be more vigilant, suggesting that exercising may not be enough to lose weight. The claim is simultaneously absurd and almost true, because running really does reduce fat. This is followed by the apparent statement of fact “The truth always shows up” which is ambiguous, implying both “fat always shows up” and “the truth is always revealed”. The next line gives agency to the fat itself which “can quickly snap out of control”. Then agency transfers to the overweight woman in the form of indirect command “eliminate unhealthy and unsightly weight issues … “. The recommendation to use “Esthetika’s proven range of rewarding slimming solutions” is brought into the clause as the solution to the weight problem. The overall message communicated by the image and language is that being overweight is a problem, and that there is a solution to this problem, accompanied by self-promotional claims using words like “breakthrough technologies”, “proven” and “rewarding”.

4.2 Overweight woman exercising on a treadmill

4.2.1 Compositional meaning
The advertisement (Figure 2) suggests an alternative way of living and being (Mitchell as quoted in Kulick and Meneley 2005, 224), which appears to be opposed to DIY exercise as an option to manage weight-loss. The left column which contains the headline “Going nowhere with hard work?” in question form is located above information about the slimming programme on offer as an alternative to exercising “Call or SMS. Free 1 week slimming”. The right column, which contains the image of a frightfully overweight and tired-looking woman exercising on a treadmill, confirms that the woman is “going nowhere with hard work”. Taking up more than 60% of the space, the image fills our field of vision and draws our immediate attention.

4.2.2 Representational meaning
The overweight woman in Advertisement 2 is depicted as doing something, namely exercising. Her right arm frantically holding the equipment and her left arm wiping her forehead form strong vectors which visually represent what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 74) call a Unidirectional Transactional Action process. But she is not succeeding, and is in obvious distress. Her action, the positioning of her arms and her facial expression, downcast eyes and drooping lips, suggest that she finds exercising hard work and not an enjoyable activity. She looks desperate, browbeaten, exhausted, and miserable, as she struggles
to lose weight. These non-verbal signals, which Lister and Wells (2001, 79) regard as “part of the human body’s expressivity”, represent the first layer of meaning, that is, the literal or denotative meaning (Barthes 1973, 1977), and answer the question what kind of person is depicted, what she is doing, and so on.

The image draws for its effect on the negative stereotype of depressed overweight women who have to do something about their weight. It displays the woman’s undesirable attributes: double chin, oversized rounded shoulders, fat hands and arms, and (for her) inappropriate sports clothes. Even her non-descript glasses and unruly hair add to her unsavoury appearance. These negative attributes present her as the deviant female form, and suggest that being so overweight she is going nowhere in life.

4.2.3 Interactive meaning
We see the woman’s face and her eyes, but she is not looking at the camera; and while we are looking at her, she is not looking at us, and so no relationship is established at all. This voyeuristic viewing presents her as a specimen on display, visually passive rather than active (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 124). The medium shot, again at 90°, with the woman’s head and shoulders in focus makes us feel physically close to the subject, and increases involvement (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), suggesting some social closeness,
that is, shortening the social distance between the overweight woman and the viewer as if she is “one of us” (van Leeuwen 2008, 138). The feeling of intimacy is enhanced by the facial expression, clearly recognisable at such a close range, and the detail visible in her foreshortened fingers and palm.

4.2.4 Overall meaning
For the advertisement to be effective, it is not enough to depict an overweight woman exercising to no purpose. Women have to see their own image in the advertisement. The location of the headline on the left in the “given” position suggests that this advertisement, unlike the first one, is addressed not to all overweight women, but more specifically to those who try to lose weight through exercise. The focus is not on the female body itself but on exercise as a form of body management.

The image of a woman exercising diligently may suggest that fatness does not indicate laziness or a lack of discipline, but rather that exercise is not an effective fat loss method. The message – clearly that exercising does no good at all for weight problems – is again extracted simultaneously from image and text together, and contrasts with the potential message of either image or text alone. Exercise is presented in health and medical discourse as positive, and so the image of a woman exercising should come across as positive. Hard work can be expected to lead to success, and so the headline Going nowhere with hard work? could assert a paradox or contradiction. Given the headline, the image tells us “this woman is going nowhere with hard work”, and given the image, the headline tells us “hard work gets you nowhere when you are trying to lose weight”. The solution is to “Take the easy way out”, namely “call or sms now” for “free 1 week slimming”.

The body copy located on the top left is in a small font, which suggests that it contains secondary information supporting the main message communicated by the image and the headline. It begins with a rhetorical question “Need to lose weight?”, the answer to which is obvious in the context of the image. This is followed by a negative command “Don’t sweat it” which makes a link to the woman sweating on the treadmill. This again leads to an easy way out, which involves buying the slimming treatment offered as a solution to the problem: “Esthetika’s LIPOCAVITRON technology beats hard work and pain when it comes to shaping up positively”. Notice the phrase “beats hard work and pain”, which frames exercise as hard work and not the best solution for dealing with weight problems.

4.3 Overweight woman and thin woman

4.3.1 Compositional meaning
The elements of the promotional material in Advertisement 3 (Figure 3) enter into an interesting spatial relationship, dividing the semiotic space into three information blocks each with a separate identity. The most salient block on the left presented as “given” contains a “double helix” image of an overweight woman and a slim woman with sharply contrasting physical attributes. The “double helix” implicitly highlights the desirability of being slim and the undesirability of being overweight. The headline “Go from imperfect to perfect” running across the two conjoined overweight and slim bodies further supports this suggestion. Written in a small font, it draws attention to the images rather than to itself. The textual promotional on “the all-new advanced slimming therapy” on the right is
presented as new, which the readers may not know and should take note of. The remaining block lower right contains an offer accompanied in the “new” position by the image of a beautiful Hong Kong actress endorsing the slimming programme.
4.3.2 Representational meaning
The heads of the woman in the double helix are not shown, and so they can be little more than representatives of overweight and slim women, respectively. The overweight woman’s pose makes her look uncomfortable and tense: her shoulder slumped forward, her fat arm positioned inelegantly with the hand on her fat thigh and the fingers tense and wide apart. Her fat leg is so positioned that she seems to be trying to raise it but failing because of the weight. She is barefoot and wearing a skimpy nightdress, which because it is inappropriate makes her look unappetising rather than sexy. Her long hair looks unruly and she is not wearing a ring or any other adornments.

However, a closer look at the thin woman shows that in sharp contrast she has personal details, including wristbands, a little black dress with a tasselled bottom edge, and stylish shoes. The dress tastefully draws attention to her curves. The v-neckline beautifully sets off her alluring cleavage, and the dress is tight enough to show that she has a small waist and short enough to show her beautifully toned and smooth thigh. Her alluring pose makes her look sexy and confident, posing like a professional model with her shoulder pulled back, her hand resting seductively on her hip just below the waist, and her fingers close together and looking relaxed. Her slim leg is raised from the ground and bent seductively at the knee, which is placed over the overweight woman’s knee to bring out the contrast, conveying the message which is preferred. This woman is going to do something because she is all dressed up and ready to go out.

On the bottom right is a relatively small photograph of the beautiful Hong Kong actress. She is doing something, namely endorsing the product, and this is underlined by the lines of her arms and the swirl of her skirt pointing to the text and to her signature placed to the left of her image. She strikes an alluring pose and the smile on her face shows how pleased she is with her body.

4.3.3 Interactive meaning
The heads of the women in the composite image are not shown, and this makes any social contact with them impossible, so that they can only be seen as objects. The actress, by contrast, looks straight at us, and tells us to buy the product. All three images are long-shots, presenting the women as strangers with whom we have no close contact. The two thin women are viewed at 90°, and the fat woman at an angle of about 45°. This has the effect of equalising the visible width of the bodies of the conjoined women.

4.3.4 Overall meaning
The juxtaposition of the two bodies draws attention to the flaws in the overweight body and the positive attributes of the slim body. In contrast to the overweight woman who seems to be having no fun at all, the slim woman is presented as enjoying herself. On its own, the composite figure can thus convey the message “you have more fun when you are slim”. This may be a motivation for slimming, but it is not the point of the advertisement. With the headline “Go from imperfect to perfect” it becomes clear that the overweight woman is the “before” imperfect image, and the slim woman the “after” perfect image, and that the one can be transformed into the other. The image supplies the concept “woman” which has been omitted: go from imperfect woman to perfect woman. The overweight woman in the “given” position identifies the kind of woman
being targeted, namely overweight women who want to be slim, and the slim woman represents what they can become. Overweight women can identify with the overweight woman in reality and with the slim woman as an aspiration. The composite image has its own given-new structure, but it is also in the “given” position with respect to the copy and the image of the actress on the right. It offers a way forward to overweight women who want to become thin. In other words, one communicative structure is embedded within another. Embedding of this kind is familiar in logic and in syntax, but it is also found in the communicative structure of this multimedia advertisement.

The textual material in the copy works together with the images to sell the slimming treatment, persuading the reader to assume responsibility for her body, specifically by using the treatment marketed on that basis: “Achieve a slim and perfectly sculpted silhouette with … Bodyline’s latest breakthrough slimming technology.” The marketised solution (“the BodyTech Perfectionsist System”) to the problems associated with being overweight, namely “flabby arms”, “bulging tummies” and “chunky thighs” is technologised and scientised, framed by reference to technology “latest breakthrough slimming technology” and scientific words “latest breakthrough formula” and “three active compounds”. The three active compounds contained in the treatment are personified and given agency, “CafeSi-lane C … sculpts your body”, “Bodyfi … relieves water retention and reduces fat storage” and “Regestrail … regenerates new skin cells, increase collages, reduces stretch marks and tightens saggy skin”. The corporate identity projected is professional. The self-promotional claims are personalised (“we”, “us”) and assertive: “renowned professional slimming professionals”, “… let us help you achieve your ideal body today” and “we are the one name women trust for lasting results”.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article examines how the overweight body is pathologised in slimming advertisements, making it the focus of critical scrutiny and actively engaging women to address their weight problem. The overall message is that there is a problem – the overweight body – and there is a solution – the marketised slimming treatment. The solution is presented as something quick and easy: all they have to do is buy the slimming treatment and they become thin. The problem is that the ideal shape is represented in an image of a slim, perfectly shaped young woman; in reality of course, whether they achieve the body shape that they desire is another matter entirely. Indeed one would not expect slimming advertisements to present the objective “truth” about women’s bodies, as their aim is to persuade women to buy what they are promoting. In this context as in other contexts, language can be regarded as a constructive tool representing particular versions of reality that are not “true” or “valid”.

The extremely overweight female bodies shown in detail as lumps of flesh using close-up camera effects draw the gaze of the reader to the pathologised self, and the treatment offers the means of changing body shape and size, making it possible to attain the thin ideal. Lupton (2013, 55) asserts that these images “conform to a long-standing discourse on fat embodiment which represents it as grotesque”. Through their size and position in the advertisements, they communicate the primary message and the physically backgrounded textual material functions to lend support to the meaning derived from the former. This explains why the focus of analysis is on the images, but the images alone
are not sufficient to convey the intended message, especially when meaning has to be extracted from image and text together. The texts contain not only descriptions of the overweight body but also promotional material which is partly drawn from scientific discourse and directives about what women should do to lose weight. It is not possible to analyse the images of these advertisements on their own and obtain meaningful results.

We have sought to combine critical discourse analysis (CDA) and multimodal analysis, following the framework outlined by Jewitt and Oyama (2001). It seems to work, at least for these three case studies. Visual analysis is at a much earlier stage of development, and new studies test and extend existing hypotheses. Someone who reads through a popular magazine processes text and image together, and our case studies show how this can be done. Further research would enable us to see if it works on a larger scale.

What we can assert at this stage is that multimodal analysis is not just a summation of text and visual analysis. While we have taken a linear approach in analysis, and then put different observations together, the viewer of the advertisement does not examine it one dimension at a time, or take text and headline separately and then put them together. The brain is a parallel processor; we surely take these things together, and make a combined response to the advertisement. The relationship is dynamic rather than static, as the output of the analysis of one mode can be used as the input to another, and determines the outcome of analysis downstream. A personal question (see Advertisement 1) leads the female reader to identify herself with an anatomical image. The image of a woman struggling on the treadmill (see Advertisement 2) leads to a negative interpretation of her hard work. A headline reinforces the visual message that overweight is imperfect and slim perfect (see Advertisement 3).

Like linguistic analysis, visual analysis is ultimately insufficient. None of the analysis above makes any sense without the common sense belief that overweight is disgusting and that overweight women are undesirable. This belief is at the starting point of the interpretation of the advertisements. Western marketing strategies will not necessarily be successful in Malaysia and other Asian countries unless women respond in much the same way. It is thus important to ascertain that the women at whom the advertisements are aimed share the ideology. Previous research, particularly those in more developed countries including Taiwan (Wong and Yi-Chia 1999), Singapore (Ung 2005), and Korea (Keel and Klump 2003) shows that body dissatisfaction and the need to conform to the thin ideal are now also affecting Asian women. This is resulting in a marked increase in the number of young women with eating disorders of the kind seen in the West (Pike and Dunne 2015). Findings drawn from semi-structured questionnaires conducted as part of a Ph.D. research project show that of the 41 participants interviewed, 35 were dissatisfied with their bodies and wanted to lose weight, and concerned with their shape and tone. They viewed thinness as a source of social power. More than half (i.e. 23) felt that slimming advertisements make them feel insecure about their bodies (Lau 2013).

The exploitation of the female body for promotional purposes is a serious matter and needs to be highlighted and addressed as it “has the power to damage a woman’s health, destroy her sense of well-being, break her pride in herself, and subvert her ability to accept herself as a woman” (Cohen 1984, 5). According to Dworkin and Wachs (2004, 611), the continual development of new ideologies of “body lack” is lucrative for big multinational companies. Body advertising discourses promote a thin body as a commodity that is easily acquired and vital to one's well-being and social worth. The female body thus becomes a
source of profit for the beauty industry on which the advertising depends. It becomes a commodity whose social currency is increasingly jeopardised by the failure to conform to the ideology that equates thinness with beauty and defines femininity in terms of the ideal female form.

Producers of weight-loss products and treatments have invested huge amounts of money in advertising gender messages that problematise overweight female bodies as illustrated in the advertisements. They appear as spoiled feminine identities in need of improvement, and exemplify how women are constantly subjected to the demands of the contemporary ideology of femininity. This raises the contentious question between “reality” and “representation” (Chaudhuri 2009, 171). By visually reducing the representations of a woman’s body to one prevailing image, slimming advertising asserts control of what women should look like, “reducing the self to the mere politics of representation” (Chaudhuri 2009, 180).

We have selected three cases from a larger corpus, and while we cannot generalise from a small handpicked sample, our case studies have brought some interesting insights to light. The adopted framework was originally used for the analysis of British sexual health materials and was also found appropriate for the analysis of our data. Sentences have long been claimed to proceed from “given” to “new”, and here the combination of text and image has a point of departure and a destination. Recursion is a fundamental property of sentences, and in one of the advertisements we have at least a simple case of embedding. It became clear during this work that multimodal analysis cannot satisfactorily be carried out by examining modes separately; each mode has to be analysed in the context of the other or others. It remains to be discovered in future work to what extent our findings are general, and to what extent they are chance properties of the items we happened to select.

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