

## GAY PERSONAL ADVERTISEMENTS IN MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper scrutinizes the correlation between language, culture, and identity in a corpus of gay personal ads collected from various websites in Malaysia over a period of one year. The gay language is a rumination of marginalization in a wider social scenario. Fairclough's (1992-93) three dimensional model of critical discourse analysis is recruited to unveil the relationship between text structure, issues of power, and ideology. The findings depicted that at text level, the structural components vary according to race and culture of the authors; at discourse practice, authors aptly voice their opinion in the cultural avenue; finally, at social stratum, the ads echo the racial stereotypes and heterosexist ideology found in the specified culture. Further research is indispensable to explore the gays' identity and culture in other parts of the world to understand better this socio-linguistic phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Gay Language, Personal Ads, Critical Discourse Analysis, Socio-Linguistics

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The data for this study came from personal ads collected from various Malaysian websites including Malaysia.craigslist.org, Guyslink.com, Mingle.com, Only-lads.com, and Personals.Carika-wan.com. Previous studies on personal ads had a focus on social psychology, whereby researchers see the ads as a simple representation of psychological reality and used it to measure certain traits and trait types in association with gender and sexual orientation. Their findings revealed that physical traits are more important than personality characteristics for men, especially gay men (Deaux and Hanna, 1984). These limited views of personal ads as 'straight-forward declaration of what one wants' (Ibid, p363) have neglected the importance of textual constraints and socio-cultural power reconstructed in the text.

Bruthiaux (1994a, 1994b) views classified ads as definable linguistic registers [(CAR (=classified ads register) & PAR (=personal ads register)] like 'baby-talk' and 'foreigner-talk'. He tries to analyse the frequency of function words and abbreviations in order to create a relationship between linguistic features and communicative functions. Nair (1992) takes into account the social and cultural variables when reading personal ads. She combines feminist critical view with a close grammatical analysis in comparing Indian and American 'matrimonial ads' claiming that 'uncovering social ideologies must follow the discovering of linguistic structures'.

Coupland (1966) had a similar view. She perceives dating advertisements as products of a discourse of commodification and marketization of modernism. She stated that the personalization of dating advertisements is made possible within the narrow textual and

generic constraints. Eventually, Davidson (1991) uses personal ads to survey how gay men relate this to sexuality and HIV/AIDS issues. He focuses on three types of lexical items: (a) health-related terms (eg, HIV-negative), (b) sexual exclusivity (eg, 1-to-1), and (c) stereotypical presentations of self (eg, straight-acting).

The present study employs a close textual analysis of the ads with a focus on the correlation between linguistic forms and situational characteristics (Biber 1994) with a wider sociolinguistic view of power and ideology. Fairclough's (1992, 1993) three-dimensional notion of discourse is employed to view language use as social practices, social relations, and social beliefs. He analyses texts in three dimensions: text, discourse practice, and social practice.

The textual analysis includes lexis, grammar, cohesion, and structure, as practised by Bruthiauz (1994a)(1994b). Analysis of discourse practice broadens the concept of the norms of production and interpretation of the social identity of the participants, which is similar to Nair (1992) and Coupland's (1996) perspective. An analysis of social practice explores the social relationships between the participants' ideology and hegemony, and in the case of personal ads, between the gay society and the dominant heterosexual social order, and power relations along the cultural, racial, and economic boundary.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Coupland (1996: 188), personal ads are 'discursive construction of self-identities within a narrow textual framework'. This can be seen in physical attributes, gender, personality, and interest. Linguistic strategies are exploited to show uniqueness. She further declared that self-promotion in these ads become part of self-identities. Hence, the ads can reveal one's perspectives, voices, and issues related to identity.

For more than two decades, researchers used personal ads to survey what people are willing to unveil themselves and what they want to seek from others. Cameron et al (1977) revealed that people's requests are identical with their sex-role stereotypes, for instance, women are inclined to show their interest in financial security and sensitivity while men are prone to looking for a partner with the possibility of a sexual relationship.

Adolescent personal ads is an area which is rarely been researched. Past researchers tried to analyse ads written by male and female adults targeting at exploring physical traits and socio-psychological nature involving gender and sexual orientation. So far four features are addressed: (a) physical attributes (eg, body size), (b) material attributes (eg, age), (c) mental attributes (eg, intelligence), and (d) social and relational attributes (eg, humor). Consequently, there is a shortage of empirical study on Malaysian adolescents on how to use personal ads to set up personal relationships.

## 2.1 PERSONAL ADS IN MALAYSIA

The use of personal ads to meet new romantic incidents and lifetime partners is not uncommon in the Western world. In Malaysia, Malaysians perceive it as an unconventional and improper way of knowing people because of cultural and societal difference. It is more common to have a one-to-one face-to-face meeting. When it comes to finding new friends, they think of personal advertisements or special friendship column in newspapers, magazines,

and the internet. The easiest channel is to surf gay websites to spot ideal guys for entertainment or dating. The popular websites are Malaysia.craigslist.org, Guyslink.com, Mingle.com, Onlylads.com, and Personals. carikawan.com. These sites provide a platform for people looking for gay friends and to establish special relationships thereafter.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY & ANALYSIS

The following personal ads were collected from various Malaysian websites including Malaysia.craigslist.org, Guyslink.com, Mingle.com, Only-lads.com, and Personals. Carikawan.com.

#### (A) TEXTS

<I> The ultimate objective of the textual analysis is to spot the lexical and grammatical structures. Generally speaking, the ads from the Malaysia corpus echo with Ferguson's (1982) description of simplified registers and Bruthiaux's (1994a) explanation of 'personal ads register' (PAR) in that fewer generic lexis, a substantial degree of grammatical simplification with fewer subordinate clauses, fewer personal pronouns, and fewer function words appear in the text. Nair (1992) and Coupland's (1996) conventionalized structure can be found, as shown in the following example:

(1) Advertiser; (2) seeks; (3) target; (4) goals; (5) comment; (6) reference (Coupland 1996:193)

Hi, I am a local Chinese in his mid 20's. Tall & Athletic Build. Would like to seek any Caucasians or Chinese ONLY whose interested in meeting up at a gay spa near KL (=Kuala Lumpur) this Saturday or Sunday. If you're young & fit, it would be a plus. [Malaysia.craigslist.org (MCO), 3/15]

Another observation by Bruthiaux (1994a) is the prevalence of strings of adjectives and nouns:

I'm a single guy, loving, caring, open-minded, happy-go-lucky and honest. I love to make friends, U will enjoy knowing me coz I will be your best friend ever! Those who are interested or those who want....

[Personals.carikawan.com (PCC), 4/15]

20 years old, gay, single, 178cm (5'10") tall, black hair, brown eyes, clean shaven, non-smoker, non-drinker. Looking for email or real-life friends, a possible relationship of casual contacts—preferably with guys up the age of 29. The detailed profile includes additional personal details. [Guyslink.com (GC), 11/14]

65 years old, gay, single, Asian (southern), 167cm (5'6") tall, average build, grey hair, hazel eyes, a little body hair, beard, non-smoker, social drinker. Looking for email or real-life friends or casual contacts—preferably with guys between the age of 18 and 65. The detailed profile includes additional personal details.

<II> Bruthiaux (1994a) indicated that a high degree of creativity and literary techniques are displayed in the ads, for instance, the use of alliteration, rhyme, puns, parallelism, metaphors, and humour:

Come add want handsome boy guy gay man. can you speak Malay? Where u live. only in Malaysia. I want a handsome boy guy man and gay. I want a very handsome boy and guy and man and gay. I like do sex u? (PCC, 3/15)

for future and future...getting to know u and getting to know everyone. I'm still single, spend most of my life in education and exploring new tasks in educating students and currently still in educ.... (PCC, 2/15)

...seek NSA relationship rather than just one-night stand. But I'm open to one-night stand too. So far don't really had one-night stand relationship as all my passed relationship was long term.... (PCC, 1/14)

I like role-playing, I love sexy outfits, I love to dance, I am a romantic. Thanks for reading this, if you come here it means you really care about me and you want to spend some time together which makes me really happy. I can't wait to meet you!

Together with the 'author-seeks-target' pattern, another rhetorical pattern, that is, the use of passivization (Coupland, 1966) is frequently used by Asians:

A person who has a sense of humour and a kinky mind is needed for a good-looking 28 yr old Chinese. To explore a true love relationship. Photo and phone no. appreciated. (PCC, 12/14)

<III> another common feature found in the PCC ads is subordination, with the sentence beginning with an 'if' clause:

If you are looking for hot SEXY CUTE AND YOUNG ur on the right page. in 23. I love straight curious guys/gay/bi. (PCC, 11/14)

If u looking for fun. I'm not that person...looking for friend and chat partner??...here I am...only open to a serious relationship (PCC, 9/14)

If you want to know me just send a message to me. I will reply ASAP. (PCC, 10/14)

If you are a married man with bisexual tendencies and M2M fantasies, we would like to hear from you. We are a none-scene gay Chinese couple looking for some drama free and safe fun with a clean, healthy and disease free married man. We value discretion and you can be assured of it. So, if this interests you, write to us and let's take it from there. (PCC, 2/15)

If you are a clean, shaved and attractive guy looking to wrestle with me and maybe even run a bit, before we have a few drinks etc, and see where this goes, send me a message with a pic. (MCO, 2/15)

Subordination is perceived by Scollon and Scollon (1995) and Young (1982) as more consistent with inductive rhetorical methods chosen by Asians in new acquaintances. This form indicates that the personal ads in Malaysia are relatively conventionalized than in the West, moreover, the social or cultural force may have an impact on text structure.

The main difference between the Malaysian and Western advertisement, especially the 'Advocate Classifieds', is the level of elaboration in the language [Bruthiaux (1994a, 1994b)]. Abbreviations or acronyms such as GWM (=gay white man) and ALA (=ALL Letters Answered) are rare in the Malaysian corpus. Another obvious difference is that personal ads use more function words than other ads in jobs and automobiles. He claims that indefinite articles, relative pronouns, and prepositions are related to explicitness and definite articles, first/second person pronouns denote a high level of involvement. Thus, there is a need for personal ads writers to seek explicitness and involvement which is based on 'culturally sanctioned' demands of the domain (Bruthiaux 1994b:36).

In Bruthiaux's corpus, abbreviations account for over 15% of the tokens and more than 95% in 'The Advocate Classifieds', for instance:

*Vry ht guy wnts 2 mt othrs w/nto brcs, mthgrds, retrns evn dntrs ?  
Im hot n really n2 it! Dnt B shy, Im not!*

## (B) Discourse Practice

<IV> Many ads in the Malaysian corpora resist the strictly informational approach called for by the 'Maxim or Economy' in a flavor of more indirect, trans-formational language, as seen in the following examples:

A 41-year-old man-"Hi, how are you." I am a kind, loving, honest, warm and caring man. I am compassionate, affectionate, funny and good sense of humor. (Mingle.com, 2/15)

24-year-old man-"Look 4 my dream girl. Hopefully Friendly, caring, sense of humor, open-minded. (Mingle.com, 3/14)

How are you? I'm 25, single, 5'11" tall. Looking for a Caucasian guy for a date and hopefully, we can go further. I'm a student going to graduate in a few months. Interested, reply to me with a picture of u and I will do the same. (MCO, 3/15)

<V> Other ways to reconcile the demand of economy and modesty is to present a positive self-evaluation to third parties, as shown below:

I'm clean tidy and humorous; I'm a straight guy but can make a friend to gay people. (MCO, 4/15)

I have a sense of humor, a conversationalist, have a kinky mind, loves talking dirty, clean, smooth skin, smell good. (MCO, 7/14)

<VI> Some authors use negative self-assessment, hoping to be honest and modest. Look at the following examples:

I'm not good looking person so if you're just looking for a handsome guy, just ignore me. And I'm not gay either. No offence. (MCO, 1/14)

I appreciate every simple small thing in my life, I'm not handsome have a face like the surface of the moon. I'm not rich can't treat u fancy restaurant or Starbucks every day [mamak (=type of Indian food, eg, rojak) no problem] lol. (MCO, 3/14)

Another area of discourse practice, according to Fairclough (1992, 1993), is what he terms as 'intertextuality' and 'interdiscursivity' where authors use various texts and discursive data aptly. Further, the disentanglement in the texts can aid the reader to unclasp a bigger order of discourse within the texts and the community.

<VII> Discourse of therapy occasionally appears in the corpus:

I'm 26, serious and passionate about my work. Offering serious session required what customers needs. I'm a specialist in Swedish massage and sensual massage. Perhaps after a working day, you need a good session of relaxation and good energy. Using 3 types of therapeutic oil for a message that cure lack of sleep/stress/dull lack of energy. (MCO, 7/14)

<VIII> Some individual language from a particular profession or area of study can be seen in the ads, for instance:

I'm just a simple open minded Malay man with a Chinese looked face. Educated and positive thinking person. Working in an airline.

<IX> Another powerful discourse is the 'discourse of commercialism'. Personal ads are unashamed activities in self-advertisement, and therefore not amazing to use advertising strategies. For example:

**Made in Malaysia.** I do not have a place, so I expect you will be able to host. Guys who are big and matured especially with facial hair and body hair is a plus. (MCO, 2/15)

**NEW ARRIVAL:** Chinese looking, 27, seeks western guy, to have fun. (MCO, 5/14)

Satisfaction guaranteed for a bodybuilder, 28, 1.9m, easy going Malaysian guy seek friendship and possibly the long-lasting relationship. (MCO, 1/14)

## (C) Social Practice

<X> About one-third of the ads contained health-related language. 'HIV' and 'safe sex' are used in the corpus. Examples are:

I am disease free and HIV -ve. Safety and mutual respect is a must and expected. (MCO, 2/15)

I am D & D free base on my last medical result. (MCO, 6/14)

<XI> There is relatively a high frequency of terms depicting a low level of

'overtness' (Taub and Lenger, 1984) about one's sexuality such as 'discreet' or 'discretion', occurring 8% of the ads:

Want to meet a mature gay for discreet relationship. only interested in men over 50yr old. Should be able to host. (MCO, 12/14)

...After first date, we can continue to enjoy the discreet NSA relationship if you wanted. I prefer a long term NSA relationship rather than... (MCO, 12/14)

...We value discretion and you can be assured of it. So, if this interests you, write to us and let's take it from there. (MCO, 2/15)

Another hegemonic battle in the ads is the use of 'straight-looking/acting' to signal homosexuality, which is about 30% of the corpus. Example:

Would you care a 30 yr old Chinese who is straight-acting, slim, educated, open, and supportive? Pic and phone no. please.

Terms like 'straight-looking/acting' indicate that 'straight' manner is inherently superior, which is acceptable to the gay community in Malaysia. Davidson (1991) declares that these words are the gays' societal reaction as a result of AIDS. With a high occurrence of HIV and social demands, this reflects their internal homophobia in the gay personals by the dominant heterosexist discourse. Some authors are frank about their homophobia:

I hate the majority of people, the majority of gay. Is anybody brave enough to discuss mass media, travelling etc to a 23 yr old Chinese student? (MCO, 2/14)

<XII> Asians seeking Asians normally offer similar traits like 'sincere' or 'mature'; Asians seeking Westerners are likely to offer physical traits such as 'masculine' or personality traits like 'overseas educated' or 'Western', as shown in the following:

I am single, 5'5", with a heavy body. So here's the deal. I am not sure if I am gay, but I do see myself attracted to strong men. I am looking for someone between 20 and 40 who is both masculine and strong. (MCO, 9/14)

I am 35 yr old with overseas education. Looking for a Caucasian guy for a date. (MCO, 8/14)

I am a chubby 36-year-old, looking for someone who is strong and can dominate me. (MCO, 3/15)

I'm 39, 5'11" tall, single. Exotic muscular gym Malaysian Chinese guy available for indoor & outdoor service. Outcall to hotel and resident within Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya only. Your privacy and satisfaction are assured. Call xx anytime at .... (MCO, 3/15)

## 4.0 DISCUSSION

The researcher of this study would like to comment on the language used in the personal ads in Malaysia. We can detect a substantial number of spelling, syntactic, semantic, punctuation, pronouns, plurality, and tense errors which is typical of Malaysian English. The reason being that nowadays Bahasa Melayu (the national language of Malaysia), not English, is used as the medium of instruction in the nursery, primary, secondary schools and in institutes of higher education. Most authors of these ads are primary or secondary graduates with a weak foundation in the English language. University graduates have the same problem, too. This justifies why there are so many errors in the ads.

Lesbian critic Kitzinger (1989:82) commented that the oppressed and socially marginalized groups can reproduce and legitimate the social order that oppresses us. The gay personal ads

in Malaysia are instances of this phenomenon. They supply an avenue for interaction in the community with limited channels to express homosexual identity and support the social order which laid down these limitations. Gay identity in personal ads creates the worst stereotypes found in heterosexist discourse: nameless, materialistic, and pre-occupied with sex.

They also strengthen the racial stereotypes both in and out of the gay society. Further, the ads support the working class gay men and reinforce the relationship between gay and western culture. 'Entering the 90's writes Ho (1995:71-88), homosexual identity becomes a more "marketable" label and product'. This merchandization of gay culture was criticized by Warner (1993:16-17) that the institutions for lesbian and gay movement in the West have been market-mediated: bars, discos....and that they are dominated by middle-class white men.

To conclude, personal ads in Malaysia aggregate a prototypical 'island discourse' since they are marginal and marginalizing. They not only create a commodification of the individuals who write and answer the ads but also construct a body of queer space (Binnie, 1995) which in turn make these gay men turn away from their role expectations to successfully 'sell' themselves.

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