Abstract

Malaysia is a multiracial country with a diverse range of religions, leading to a broad range of religious festivals throughout the year. In recent years, corporate giants such as Petronas, Telekom Malaysia (TM), Tenaga and Astro have taken to airing television commercials (TVCs) that contain a local touch when greeting their customers. Perhaps the TVCs that have noticeably touched the hearts of most Malaysians would be those sponsored by Petronas. Petronas used to commission the late Yasmin Ahmad to produce these TVCs. Thus, this paper is a visual analysis of the Petronas advertisements for one of the main religious festivals celebrated in Malaysia: Hari Raya Aidilfitri. The corpus selected for analysis is those TVCs directed by Yasmin Ahmad for Petronas between the years 1995 and 2008. The theoretical framework for the analysis of these social-commentary type commercials is the one proposed by Theo van Leeuwen.

Keywords: visual analysis, commercials, Yasmin Ahmad, religious festivals

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multiracial country with a diverse range of religions to complement her rich heritage. Hence, it is no surprise that Malaysians celebrate a plethora of religious festivals throughout the year. Recently, corporate giants like Petronas, TM, Tenaga and Astro, have taken to airing television commercials (TVCs) with a local touch when greeting their customers from various ethnic groups. This is because understanding ethnicity is seen as crucial in understanding the functioning and viability of Malaysia’s multicultural society (Abraham 1999). Malaysians tend to identify themselves by ethnic groups and not by national-
it. Ethnic divisions in Malaysia are based on language use (Watson 1980) in both formal and informal situations (Abraham 1999). Ethnic diversity in Malaysia is divisive, with individual ethnic groups having their own perceptions of social reality (Milne 1978).

However, despite all the diversity in ethnicity and language, Malaysians have come to embrace the concept of the “open house”, which is evident throughout the year when the various races celebrate their important festivals. For example, the Malays will have their open house during Hari Raya Aidilfitri, while the Chinese will have theirs during the Chinese New Year, and the Indians will open their house to guests during Deepavali. Many corporations have thus adopted the idea of reaching out to their customers in accordance with the ethnic groups to which they belong during their respective religious festivals. It is hoped that by doing so, their customers, or prospective customers, will be drawn further to their company and become more receptive to the product or service that they are selling. There is growing evidence to suggest that consumers are willing to use their purchasing power to reward or punish companies based on their social responsibility (Creyer 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya 2001; Sen & Morwitz 1996). Linking socially responsible behaviour with the brand can be essential in developing the brand’s values and personality (Kitchin 2003), as well as creating value in terms of differentiation within the market (Johnson 2003). Greeting their customers during the festive season can also be viewed as a form of social responsibility by the company in enhancing ties among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. As customers become increasingly demanding, both in terms of price and quality, as well as the firm’s social responsibility (Cunningham 1997; Ptacek & Salazar 1997; Sen & Morwitz 1996), corporate giants especially want to show that they care about society besides managing the profits of the company.

Television commercials (TVCs) are usually produced with the intention of accomplishing a ‘communication goal or to transmit messages to target audiences’ (Wang & Chen 2006: 43). They are essentially meant to invoke certain feelings in target audiences. The main objective of advertising is to create a positive attitude towards a brand (Burton, Kreer & Gray 1972; Rothschild 1987; Starch 1914). Additionally, the fact that images have the power to arouse and thereby influence a consumer’s choice is widely recognised (Zaichkowsky & Vipat 1993) and capitalised on by advertisers to convey their client’s message. Perhaps the TVCs (especially those aired during festive seasons) that have noticeably touched the hearts of most Malaysians are those sponsored by Petronas. Petronas used to commission the late Yasmin Ahmad to produce these TVCs. The commissioning of TVCs can also be viewed
as a form of employer branding. It helps to improve the image of the
sponsor in the eyes of the customer. The term ‘employer branding’
appears to have been coined by Ambler & Barrow who define it as
‘the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits pro-
vided by employment and identified with the employing company’
relates to three main groups of concepts: corporate culture and iden-
tity; internal relationship marketing; and corporate reputation. Thus
employer branding represents a unique synthesis. It is clearly a cross-
functional process ranging across public relations/communication man-
agement, marketing (Adamson 2004; Simms 2003), advertising (Li, Ew-
ing & Berthon 2005), human resources management (Brandon 2005;
Martin, Beaumont, Doig & Pate 2004), general management and qual-
ity management. Hence, the use of TVCs to greet customers is an in-
genious means of fulfilling several roles at the same time.

In order to understand the subtle nuances and symbolic representa-
tions in the TVCs produced by Yasmin Ahmad better, a closer look at
Malay culture in Malaysia is imperative. One of the socio-cultural as-
pects of Malays in Malaysia is that many of them living in villages are
governed by strong social ties and strict social control (Nazaruddin
Mohd Jali, Ma’rof Redzuan, Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah & Ismail Mohd
Rashid 2008). As such, they are a close-knit community who place
much emphasis on fostering social relationships with their family mem-
bers, relatives, friends and other community members. Malays are gen-
erally regarded as “humble people who do not impose their wishes
upon others … even-tempered and able to control themselves; hot-
tempered behavior is not respected and often regarded as “rude” (no
manners)” (Nazaruddin Hj. Mohd Jali et al. 2008: 47). These traits are
evident in their social relationships with others, be they Malay or other-
wise. Consequently, Malays seldom display strong emotions like anger
and prefer to be evasive rather than give frank answers. This can cause
misunderstanding about their real feelings, attitudes, opinions and be-
liefs. It can sometimes be confusing to those who do not understand
their culture and might mistake them as dishonest people. This misun-
derstanding ‘goes beyond relations between people and into the eco-
nomic, social and political areas’ (Nazaruddin Hj. Mohd Jali et al. 2008:
147). Strict social control regulates the behaviour of Malays to ensure
that they observe the values and norms of the community. They also
prefer consensus whenever a decision is to be made and prefer to avoid
confrontations. Malays also have an extended family system, making
their family unit a big one, and thus the idea of the family as an impor-
tant institution for social security is evident (Nazaruddin Hj. Mohd Jali
et al. 2008). In terms of religion, all Malays are Muslims, but not all
Muslims are Malays. The religion, Islam, which is practised by the Malays, teaches them to be open-minded, tolerant, conservative and gentle (Nazaruddin Hj. Mohd Jali et al. 2008). These elements are used suggestively in Yasmin Ahmad’s TVCs for Hari Raya to reinforce or remind Malays and Muslims alike to remain true to their culture and religion.

The aim of this paper is twofold: one, to identify the strategies used to convey the festive message to the audience; two, is to delineate the symbols of the festive message. The paper is thus a visual analysis of the Petronas advertisements for one of the main religious festivals celebrated in Malaysia: Hari Raya Aidilfitri.

2. Background

There are undoubtedly many TVCs produced by various companies and the individuals working in those companies. However, this study seeks to analyse the TVCs produced by Yasmin Ahmad of Leo Burnett Malaysia. In order to fully understand or justify this decision, it is important to take a step back and look at this individual’s background.

Yasmin Ahmad (7 January 1958–25 July 2009) was a Malaysian writer, scriptwriter and film director. Before her demise, she was the executive creative director at the world’s fourth largest communications network, Leo Burnett Malaysia (Leo Burnett Malaysia, 2010). In her blog, this is how she described herself: ‘I am optimistic and sentimental to the point of being annoying, especially to people who think that being cynical and cold is cool. Everyday, I thank Allah for everyday things like the ability to breathe, the ability to love, the ability to laugh, and the ability to eat and drink’ (Yasmin Ahmad 2009a).

Yasmin Ahmad’s quirky sense of humour won her an equal share of admirers and detractors. Often ridiculed by Muslim clerics at home but admired abroad, Yasmin Ahmad said that only God would stop her from making movies. Although tending to explore sensitive subjects such as interracial relationships and religion, she was no stranger to controversy. ‘It’s rare to find a woman filmmaker in Muslim society, and even rarer when she is an outspoken talent unafraid of controversy,’ wrote Roger Garcia, former director of the Hong Kong International Film Festival, of Yasmin (Jalil Hamid 2007). Her previous efforts were criticised at home but some went on to win awards at film festivals abroad, increasing her acclaim (Jalil Hamid 2007). For example, her film Sepet was criticised by a local Malay daily (i.e. Berita Harian), a local television channel (i.e. Radio Television Malaysia) and even the then Minister of Culture. The movie, however, went on to receive the Best Asian Film award at the 18th Tokyo International Film Festival.
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(Yasmin Ahmad 2009b). Several years later, her other movie, Muallaf, was also honoured by the 21st Tokyo International when it was given ‘a Special Mention in the Asian-Middle Eastern section, while here at home (Malaysia), it was facing a possible ban’ (Yasmin Ahmad 2009b). She herself expressed how surprised she would be if the movie Muallaf, which cost one million ringgit to make, was to be released in Malaysia (Jalil Hamid 2007).

Besides producing feature films, Yasmin Ahmad also produced numerous television commercials well-known in Malaysia for their humour, heart and love that crosses cross-cultural barriers, in particular her ads for Petronas, the national oil and gas company’ (Yasmin Ahmad 2010). Her work ‘made the world of advertising stand up and take notice first in print ads and then TV commercials (TVCs)’ (Yoga 2009). She was most renowned for her Petronas series of television ads that marked the Merdeka celebrations and all the major festive occasions, Hari Raya Aidilfitri (and Aidil Adha), the Chinese New Year and Deepavali. Colour blindness and racial unity were constant themes in the acclaimed film-maker and director’s works (Tan, Pharmy & Tan 2009). Petronas’ Legal and Corporate Affairs Division senior general manager Mohd Azhar Osman Khairuddin said that Yasmin approached his company in 1995 ‘to propose a new concept of communicating their messages in line with their values, beliefs and philosophy as a company’ (Yoga 2009: T23). According to Leo Burnett managing director, Tan Kien Eng, ‘the Petronas advertisements … were all about Bangsa Malaysia, unity and how different people remembered different ones’ (Yoga 2009: T22). He added that it is remarkable for normal everyday people to discuss advertising, or watch television or read the newspapers just to catch her advertisement. Tan points out that ‘people look out for, wait, anticipate and watch and comment on’ Yasmin Ahmad’s TVCs (Yoga 2009: T22). While those commercials, which never highlighted the brand itself, were mostly considered warm and touching, they had their detractors. Many accused her of being sentimental but she refused to be afraid of showing her sentimental side to the world. Her reply was ‘if you were to remove every bit of sentimentality from your life, then what have you left? Only the worst life imaginable, that’s what’ (Yoga 2009: T22). Yasmin Ahmad’s poignant Petronas TVCs highlight the racial unity of Malaysians that touched the hearts of many, especially Malaysians. Yasmin said that people were ‘quite sick of the racial divide’, and she decided to ‘show how possible and mutual it was to achieve (racial unity) in attitude’ (Tan, Aznita & Tan 2009):
‘I never look for trouble, just making a film,’ said the director who counts Charlie Chaplin as an inspiration. Chaplin always infuses humor with great drama. I think that (is) what life is. Life is never just humorous, never just tragic. (Jalil Hamid 2007)

3. Methodology

3.1 Data

The corpus selected for analysis consists of TVCs directed by Yasmin Ahmad for Petronas between the years 1995 and 2008. These TVCs were commissioned by Petronas. The Petronas festive TVCs by Yasmin Ahmad chosen for this study are as follows:

- Hari Raya Aidilfitri (and Aidil Adha),
- 1. 7 Boys and Cow (Bahasa Malaysia)
- 2. Umbrella (Bahasa Malaysia)
- 3. Moral Values (Bahasa Malaysia)
- 4. Hearing Aid (Bahasa Malaysia)

3.2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for the analysis of these social-commentary type commercials is that proposed by Kress & van Leeuwen (1996). Kress & van Leeuwen’s approach is based on Michael Halliday’s theoretical notion of metafunction. There are three metafunctions used for analysing visual semiotic structure: ideational, interpersonal and textual. However, Kress & van Leeuwen have extended this idea to analysing images, using a slightly different terminology: representational, interactive and compositional meaning respectively. Although there are three areas of analysis in Kress & van Leeuwen’s theoretical framework, this study will only concentrate on the analysis of representational meaning, since covering all the three areas would take me too far.

Representational meaning refers to how objects are represented in an image and how they interact with one another. In other words, it is how the ‘participants’ in the text are depicted. Here, visual representation can be a narrative or conceptual process. Narrative representations relate participants in terms of ‘doings’ and ‘happenings’ of the unfolding of actions, events, or processes of change. Thus, an agent, an object, and an action, reaction, or process of change is evident during the analysis. In addition, the participants in the narrative structure are connected by an implicit or explicit vector that denotes the direction of
the action. The conceptual framework represents participants in a generalised or timeless state and consists of ‘classificational, analytical, and symbolic processes’ (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 56).

4. Analysis

In the TVCs wishing the Muslims Selamat Hari Raya, there is clear evidence as to who the vector is and who reacts to the action. For instance, in the TVC ‘7 boys and cow’, the mother of the seven boys is the vector. Although there is no physical line at the beginning of the TVC, it is seen at the end of the advertisement when the boys come home with the cow; the boys crowd around her and revive her after she has fainted, and she lovingly touches them on the face to show her appreciation for their creative ‘find’. The vector is seen in the initial part of the TVC when she verbally ticks off her checklist for the coming religious festival with her sons. When it comes to ticking off ‘beef’, the boys look at one another and shake their heads before she glances up from preparing food to look at them and shakes her head in disappointment. This vector sparks off a reaction from the boys, who then rush off in search of beef. It then becomes a transactive reaction when the boys manage to bring home a cow for their mother to cook. The symbolic structures are very apparent here as the mother ticks off her grocery list with her sons. Each of these items in her grocery list is important as a part-whole structure for a Muslim family to celebrate Hari Raya. Without these ingredients, the celebration is deemed incomplete. Thus, when the main item in the grocery list is missing, the boys have to go out in search of beef. When they fail to buy beef from various sources, they have to think their way out of the box by bringing home a cow to their mother. The cow is a symbolic attribute to the main dish for Muslims during this festival. Thus, the boys know that they have to find this essential ingredient no matter what it costs them to do so.

The other TVC, ‘Umbrella’, is rather unique, as both the car driver and the old man take turns to be the vector and reactor. Initially, the driver is the vector when he stops his car and looks at the old man from his rear-view mirror. This prompts the old man to react by running towards the car. Unfortunately, the driver is in a hurry and decides to drive off. He crashes into a tree not far away, and the old man now becomes the vector when he knocks on the car window to revive the driver from unconsciousness. The driver reacts by waking up, and then shares the old man’s umbrella to walk to the village. Here, a physical vector is seen when they huddle close together to hold the umbrella. Symbolic structures are also apparent in this TVC. The symbolic attribute of the heavy rain is synonymous with the cleansing of one’s soul.
from previous year’s sin. Muslims believe in asking for forgiveness from their God, *Allah*, and also from their parents or elders every year during this religious festival. Thus, the use of heavy rain in the TVC on the eve of *Hari Raya* is symbolic as it illustrates the cleansing of a Muslim soul. In addition, the use of the umbrella by the old man and the picture of him walking back to the village, as opposed to the young man driving back to the village, marks the development that has taken place. The young man has become successful and now lives in comfort while the old man is still poor and living a simple life. This contrast serves to highlight the moral of the story in the TVC, where as a Muslim, although one has become successful, one must be humble and help others in need. It does not mean that when one is successful, one does not need help from anyone else, particularly from the less fortunate. So the TVC depicts the young man who hesitates to help the old man, but the old man forgives the young man for his selfishness by helping him and offering the shelter of his humble, trusty umbrella to shelter them from the heavy rain as they walk home to the village. The young man realises his folly when he accepts the old man’s help, and they walk to the village together.

In the other TVC on ‘Moral values’, the father and the boy become the vectors while the girl and the old, blind man react to their actions. The father is a loving and generous man, who never fails to reward his daughter with gifts for her scholarly, artistic and curricular accomplishments. In return, the girl is encouraged to achieve greater heights. The reward for these achievements is the presents from her father. In the TVC, the girl is seen receiving three sets of presents from her father. The vector is clearly evident in several scenes: one, in the opening scene where the father ties his daughter’s shoelaces before putting his hand on her shoulder and later hugging her when she hesitates to enter the school. The other time when the father gives his daughter a present is when she does well in sports. He places his hand on her shoulder, suggesting a pat-on-the-back for her achievements. As the father is taller than the daughter, the direction of the vector is diagonal, indicating an unequal level of power where the father is the authority and the daughter is the subject. On the other hand, the vector between the boy and the old man is seen when he gives the old man a bath. It is not clear if the old man is his father or someone else (e.g. relative, neighbour). However, one thing is clear, and that is that the boy bathes the old man and even washes his feet. To do this he has to squat. The vector implies that the boy, although in an authoritative position due to his youth and physical ability, is not afraid to humble himself by squatting to wash the blind old man’s feet. Incidentally, the old man is sitting down for his bath, lowering his position even further from au-
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However, the boy manages eye contact with the girl and smiles to her when he catches her staring at them. This non-physical vector is also significant as it shows that he is not at all ashamed of his act of humility.

The first vector between the father and daughter is a transactive reaction as the girl is rewarded for her achievements and gets a pen, a musical box and a pair of shoes. The other vector between the boy and the girl is not so apparent, as the girl sits down thinking about the boy’s action and how he does not expect to be rewarded for doing good. The use of symbolic structures also strengthens the message in the TVC. The girl is rewarded with symbolic structures such as a pen for doing well in her exam, a musical box for her dance performance and a pair of shoes for her excellence in sports. All these presents are meant to remind the girl of the type of achievement that she has attained. It is also an act of love by her father, who is always there to motivate and guide her in her formative years, especially as she does not have a mother. On the other hand, the symbolic attribute of the boy bathing the old man is a reminder to the girl that there is something more noble and admirable than achieving all those accomplishments, and that is to do something for someone else without fear or favour. The boy humbles himself and uses his time to bathe the old, blind man without waiting to be rewarded for his noble deed. This is something revered by Muslims as it shows that one’s heart is pure and that one does something selflessly.

The TVC on the ‘Hearing aid’ has evidence of two vectors. One is of an old picture where the daughter sits on the floor beside her father who is seated on a chair, and rests her head and arms on her father’s lap. Her father’s hand is around her shoulder. This vector indicates an unequal relationship where the father is in power and the daughter is in a submissive role. The second vector is seen when daughter realises her ungrateful behaviour and puts her hands on her father’s shoulders. The daughter does this standing up before she sits on the floor and assumes the position in the photo. Thus, this shift in the angle of the vector denotes how the daughter transfers her authority to her frail father as a sign of renewed respect and love for him. In turn, her father’s arm over her shoulder is a response to her action to show that he has forgiven her. The frequency of symbolic structures in this TVC is rather high. The analytical structures of the family members in the TVC show the inter-relationships among the family members. The daughter and son-in-law’s action towards the father shows their insensitivity towards the older generation, especially to someone who has raised them. They only realise their mistake when their own children reenact their action in a role play. This brings the couple to their senses,
especially the daughter, who then goes to seek forgiveness from her father. Although the daughter does not say anything, her action of putting her head on her father’s lap shows that she repents and asks for her father’s forgiveness. In turn, her father’s arm over her shoulder is a gesture of forgiveness. The symbolic attributes of alienating the old man by giving him a set of enamel utensils (so that he will not be able to break any more utensils), making him wear diapers and making him eat by himself on the veranda all serve to further highlight the insensitivity of the younger generation towards the older generation. This act of insensitivity to the older generation is something not to be proud of among Muslims.

5. Discussion

TVCs are not only to promote or educate the public on a new product; they are now also used to promote or educate the public on the values and norms of the religion and culture of one’s community. This idea is clearly seen, together with typical humour, in the TVCs produced by Yasmin Ahmad and commissioned by Petronas for the festive celebration of Hari Raya.

In the first TVC, ‘7 Boys and Cow’, the boys are obedient and filial. They know that, as good sons, they should try to fulfil their mother’s wishes in any way that they can, even if it means bringing home a cow for the mother. In return, their mother is so touched by their obedience and tenacity to search for beef that she faints but recovers to thank them for their ‘gift’. The scene showing how, during this religious festival, the sons show their love to their mother is both poignant and significant.

The second TVC, ‘Umbrella’, highlights the idea of being patient, generous and helpful to everyone, regardless of one’s background. The young man is impatient to reach the village and break the fast. He thus ignores the old man who is walking to the village also to break fast. Ironically, patience is one of the virtues taught to Muslims during the fasting month of Ramadhan. Although the young man displays negative traits, the old man continues to help him by offering to share the umbrella with him. This act of kindness is a valuable message to Muslims who have forgotten that one of the teachings of the Holy Quran is to be kind and patient.

In the TVC, ‘Moral Values’, Yasmin Ahmad draws attention to the value of selflessness. The girl has always been driven by her father to achieve excellence in her studies, curricular activities and sports. She is always rewarded for her achievements, and she is always happy to receive these presents. However, the picture of the young man bathing
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the blind old man without any expectations of a reward makes the girl realise that she has been rather selfish for always waiting to be rewarded when here is a boy who is doing something noble without expecting a reward. Once again, Yasmin Ahmad’s sentimentality is indicated together with the warm feelings associated with showing tender loving care to other people.

The final TVC, ‘Hearing Aid’, drives home the value of filial piety. It is not enough to give shelter and food to one’s parents, one must also show them love, affection and tolerance. One’s actions are constantly observed by the younger generation who learn from us. What the younger generation learns from us is ultimately but a reflection of our own actions and this in turn makes us reflect on our actions and question who we really are. In the TVC, the old father chooses to be literally deaf by removing his hearing aid whenever he hears something unpleasant. He feels sickened by all the hurtful remarks that suggest intolerance of his aging body. Like most Malays, he chooses to keep silent rather than make a scene. However, he does display some signs of sadness (i.e. pushing his utensils away from his table) to remind his daughter and son-in-law that he is displeased with them, but he does not say anything. Silence when unhappy at a state of affairs is a common trait among Muslims and is stressed in this commercial by Yasmin Ahmad.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the TVCs for the religious festive season of Hari Raya highlight the common traits of Malay Muslims to remind them of values that are important. Many viewers are touched by these TVCs as they are prompted to remember the values and norms of being a good Malay and Muslim, as Yasmin Ahmad uses several strategies to convey these values during the festive season. These include comparing the behaviour of the young with the old and focusing on filial piety, selflessness and forgiveness and then consolidating these messages, by introducing some symbolic elements in the TVCs, such as the cow, umbrella and hearing aid. These simple but symbolic elements help to convey the messages more clearly to the viewers as they are objects or elements that we are exposed to during our lifetime. Additionally, Yasmin Ahmad’s TVCs depict the interactions between the participants in the TVC. Through this interaction, she has portrayed the representation meaning that van Leeuwen has outlined in his framework whereby the ‘doings’ and ‘happenings’ that unfold reveal the changes that occur in the participants for the better. As such, it is no wonder that there was an outpouring of grief when Malaysians heard that Yas-
min Ahmad had passed away. She has achieved something that many producers would like to emulate.

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References


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