

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Gender Representation in Three Indonesian Sanitary Pad TV Advertisements

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Abstract. With regard to how various methods are employed to depict and construct gender roles, which ultimately shape gender identity, the goal of this study is to comprehend and examine the politics of gender identity construction in advertisements of sanitary pads advertisements namely Laurier, Charm, and Softex. Using visual grammar theory by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this study analyzes how verbal and visual modes interact to reflect gender representations in the advertisements. The findings indicate that the commercials attempted to avoid menstrual stereotypes and taboos by involving men in purchasing hygienic pads. Women are depicted as comfortable accepting help from men and able to engage in activities comfortably during menstruation. This study contributes to a better understanding of gender representation in Indonesian TV advertisements and provides insights for advertisers to create more inclusive and less stereotypical commercials.

Keywords: gender representation, sanitary pads, Indonesia, TV advertisements, multimodal discourse analysis.

1 Introduction

Many brands have influenced people through their advertisements as media has developed in recent years. Marketing campaigns now play a crucial role in business operations since they have an impact on the current and long-term health of markets and enterprises. One of the key components of using them is being able to adapt to the constantly changing environment [15] [16] It also holds true for marketing communication, where a well-rounded toolkit of communication techniques leads to long-lasting relationships with customers, growing markets and enterprises, and hitting the target audience. An ad is commonly delivered through a variety of forms of mass media, comprising traditional media such as television, radio, billboards, printed media like magazines and newspapers, as well as contemporary media such as social networking sites and emails. The advertisement provides consumers with product information, thereby influencing their decision-making process regarding the worthiness of purchasing the product.

Advertisements can construct the public's attitudes, beliefs, and ideas towards a particular way of life, principle, and role. In that sense, Multimodal Discourse Analysis aids in demonstrating the way an advertisement affects the message and interpretation of the product to the consumers. Many studies have analyzed an ad from the multimodal discourse perspective since it is concerned with the contexts involved in the use of language.

Studies on gender representation in commercials worldwide have been established [2], [4], [5]; [6]. Some of the gender representation in Indonesian TV advertisements appears to be stereotypical. revealed in their study that a male character is shown in ExtraJoss advertising as being rugged and tenacious in battle, with the soul of a rescuer [7]. The Molto commercial, on the other hand, features a woman figure who is gracefully conveying the image of feminism that is ingrained in her character. This figure is portrayed as classy, aromatic, and able to catch a man's eye. However, gender roles were reversed in formula milk commercials, with men doing home duties and women working in public places [8]. Feminine characteristics were maintained, while masculinity underwent a minor alteration due to fathers being present and involved in their children's lives and being attentive caregivers.

conducted research on the portrayal of gender in advertisements for sanitary napkins in China and revealed that the advertisers tried to counter menstrual taboos [9]. In this study, the researchers focused on examining three sanitary pads TV advertisements along with their modalities from three different brands, namely Laurier, Charm, and Softex.

Inspired by the aforementioned studies, this paper explores the ways in which the website's linguistic and visual components represent the advertisements for sanitary pads in Indonesia. Successful marketing communication strategies for advertisements have been found to be based on a variety of factors, including culture, lifestyle, consumption patterns, purchasing habits, preferred communication channels, and more, all of which contribute to a specific gender representation in Indonesia. The primary focus of this study is thus to uncover and elaborate the gender representations displayed in visual and verbal discourse in the three Indonesian Sanitary Pads TV advertisements.

The writers expected that by analyzing multimodal discourse in the three Indonesian Sanitary Pads TV advertisements, this research would provide a valuable contribution. This study aims to enhance readers' comprehension of how gender is portrayed through verbal and visual modes in contemporary Indonesian TV advertising discourse.

2 Literature Review

Multimodality pertains to integrating various human communication modes, including visual, audio, written, oral, and spatial [10]. The use of multimodal discourse analysis has increased due to the contemporary digital media's emergence that incorporates a variety of elements such as written language, graphics, still and moving images, and audio. Advertising has also evolved into multimedia communication that relies on multiple modes for effective promotion. In television advertisements, multimodality involves using different modes, such as visual and auditory cues. These modes interactively convey the advertiser's messages and intentions. Multimodality is associated with the Visual Grammar theory developed [10].

According to Visual Grammar theory, the functions of images are categorized into three types: representational, interactional, and compositional meaning. Firstly, the representational meaning of visual images can be categorized as either narrative or conceptual, with narrative

representing dynamic actions and events while conceptual describes stable types, structures, and meanings. Secondly, the interactive meaning involves projecting the social relationship between the producer and receiver of signs. Thirdly, the ability to form meaning through combining visual and verbal elements in MDA is known as compositional meaning. In multimodal discourse, there are two types of participants depicted in an image: represented participants (such as people, places, and things) and interactive participants (the individuals communicating through the image) [10].

gender is a societal creation encompassing various distinctions in psychology, society, and culture between men and women [11]. When examining gender representation, it becomes evident that stereotyping and ideologies are associated with men and women. stated that stereotyping could have negative connotations as it often reinforces the power dynamics of the dominant group over the vulnerable or powerless [12]. [13] noted that gender studies often examine how communication is utilized to showcase power dynamics, inequality, or feminist perspectives. Furthermore, verbal and visual communication often establish binary oppositions between genders perpetuating cultural stereotypes. These dichotomies reflect the underlying beliefs of each gender [14].

[4] conducted a study titled “Remediation and Counter-Hegemony of Gender Dichotomy in Indonesian Family: Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Two Kecap Advertisements“ and scrutinized two Kecap ABC advertisements aired in 2018 and analyzed the commercials using Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal discourse analysis method (2001) and Fairclough's instrumental analysis framework (1992). This research found that women in those advertisements are depicted as capable of dealing with family exploitation, and the renegotiation of domestic work is attainable [4]. Additionally, the study illustrated how masculinity is conveyed through various modalities, such as speech, gestures, and moving images, suggesting that men can also participate in domestic tasks. Besides,[9] titled “Femvertising and Postfeminist Discourse: Advertising to Break Menstrual Taboos in China” by employing Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and a multimodal view of discourse to analyze three commercials for Libresse sanitary napkins that aired in China to counter menstrual taboos suggests that Libresse's advertisements aimed to reject menstrual stereotypes and cultural restrictions while highlighting personal preferences and independence [9]. There was also an implied heterosexist message that sought to engage men in the commercial.

Lastly, [2] conducted a study entitled "A Multimodal Analysis of Gender Representations in British and Italian TV Advertisements," which was part of a research project called "The Portrayal of Women in Advertising: Cross-linguistic and Multi-modal Viewpoints.". The objective was to identify and examine biased depictions of women in advertisements using Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model approach (1992). Drawing on previous studies on language and gender, the scholars revealed subliminal messages in ads that perpetuate gender stereotypes or objectify women based on their physical appearance [2]. They analyzed ads from various countries to determine the prevalence of such depictions.

3 Method

The data obtained in this study are in the form of verbal and visual elements, intending to describe gender representation in a television advertisement in Indonesia through the modes presented in the data. The data sources are the three latest sanitary pads video advertisements. The first commercial was taken from Laurier Indonesia's YouTube video entitled "Laurier Active Day." In this video, men are depicted buying feminine hygiene products and giving them to women. The second advertisement was titled "Charm Safe Night - Water Attack Ver. 30" by Unicharm Indonesia. This advertisement portrays a woman expressing concern while sleeping at night during her menstrual cycle. The last commercial was taken from Softexpedia's official YouTube account titled "Softex Comfort Night #NyamanBintang5 30s" and shows three women enjoying a staycation together, having fun, and sleeping soundly during menstruation. The duration of the commercials varied between 15 and 30 seconds, and all of them were published in 2022. The data in this research are obtained by screen-capturing images from the video.

Examining the selected videos was based on Kress and van Leeuwen's Theory of Visual Grammar [10], which identifies three primary language functions. This theoretical framework was chosen based on the selected genre that combines images and text. The selected videos were analyzed on the representational, interactive, and compositional levels to demonstrate gender representation by considering salient components such as contact, social distance, attitude, and verbal representation.

After analyzing the data, the researchers made observations about the ideological content encoded by the visual and textual content of the videos to show how various semiotic elements can reinforce certain ideologies or stereotypes. The underlying assumption can draw attention to gendered discourses through Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 The gender representations displayed in visual and verbal discourse

The analyzed advertisements present a range of approaches to gender representation, showcasing a departure from conventional norms. One notable aspect is the inclusion of men in the narrative, challenging traditional gender roles and promoting their involvement in the discourse surrounding menstruation. This progressive approach seeks to encourage men to play a role in breaking menstrual taboos and fostering gender equality. Furthermore, the commercials also feature women who defy narrow beauty standards, with diverse hairstyles and body shapes being celebrated. This representation emphasizes inclusivity and empowers women by showcasing a broader range of identities and experiences. Further supporting evidence regarding the findings can be outlined as follows.

A1: Laurier

This advertisement lasts for 15 seconds and is divided into two distinct sections. The first segment features three pairs of men and women, with the men depicted purchasing Laurier sanitary pads. The second segment showcases two men and a woman promoting the advertised product.

A1.1 Representational meanings

Regarding the representational metafunction at the narrative level, the first part of this commercial incorporates vectors formed by the men's hands directed toward the sanitary pads. These men are portrayed taking the product in a market setting, and subsequently, while carrying the product, their arms extend toward the women. The men are engaged in actions such as taking, carrying, and giving the product. The men are the actors, while the sanitary pads and the women represent the goals. The narrator indicates the relationships between the men and women explicitly and through contextual cues surrounding them. Each pair is represented visually within a distinct setting, where the husband-wife pair is depicted in a house featuring a photo frame of them hanging on the wall, the boyfriend-girlfriend pair against a contemporary simple house design, and the brother-sister pair in a pink-colored room (see **Figure 1**). Meanwhile, in the second part of this advertisement, vectors are formed by the participants' arms directed toward the sanitary pads, in which they are shown acting for carrying the product. In this segment, the two men and the woman are the actors, and the product serves as the goal.



Fig. 1. Vectors formed and placements of women and men in Laurier's advertisement.

A1.2 Interactional meanings

In terms of interactional meanings, the participants in the first segment of the advertisement were depicted in a manner where they were not directly looking at the viewer. Instead, each pair of participants were positioned facing each other. This arrangement creates an impression of an offer. Conversely, in the second part, all participants are shown looking directly at the viewer, establishing a sense of demand. However, all participants in the first and second parts were shown smiling throughout the advertisement. The pairs in the first part are shown smiling at each other, while the participants in the second part are smiling directly at the viewer. This advertisement utilizes a medium shot, bringing the commercial visually closer to the viewer. The majority of the scenes are captured from an eye-level angle, signifying the viewer's involvement in the world of the participants.

A1.3 Compositional meanings

In terms of its compositional meanings, both in the first and second segments, the women are positioned on the left side, implying their 'given' or already existing status. In contrast, the men are placed on the right side, signifying their presence as 'new' or novel elements (see **Figure 1**). Moreover, the men were attired in more vibrant colors than the women, accentuating the men as the most salient elements in this composition. The advertisement does not contain framing devices. However, in the first segment, this advertisement shows each pairing together in a single shot to reveal their relationships. One particular shot is also isolated from the others through transition frame lines. In the second segment, the commercial commences with an individual shot of a man, followed by the woman's individual shot, and abruptly introduces another man who also receives an individual shot. Towards the end of the video, the man who shows up first in the second part of this advertisement and the woman attempt to join hands to form a heart gesture.

A1.4 Verbal mode

In terms of verbal mode, there is a narration that states, "Suami, pacar, adikpun tahu," or, "husbands, boyfriends, even brothers know," in which the verb "know" is intransitive. An intransitive verb does not require a direct object to complete its meaning. In this case, "know" is a complete verb without requiring an object, suggesting that husbands, boyfriends, and brothers have knowledge or understanding without specifying the details of what they know.

A2: Charm

This advertisement lasts 30 seconds and is set in a bedroom. The participants are both women who are sleeping next to each other. The commercial is divided into several parts, where they are shown sleeping and awake.

A2.1 Representational meanings

There are vectors formed by the woman on the right's arms toward her waist. There is contextualization to her action as she stands and turns her back to the camera. The text "bocor" or "leaking" appears on the screen and depicts her concern about leakage during her sleep, reinforcing the contextualization of her action rather than a mere pose (see **Figure 2**). The woman on the left saw her action, and her arm movement towards her mouth portrayed her concern and surprise for the other woman.



Fig. 2. Contextualization of the participants' actions in the Charm's advertisement.

A2.2 Interactional meanings

At first, the participants did not appear to look at the viewer, making the scene an offer. However, they also portrayed looking at the viewer, transforming the scene into a demand. Both participants express various emotions through their facial expressions, including worry, fear, comfort, and happiness. This commercial utilizes medium to long shots, employing medium shots when the participants are shown awake and long shots when they are shown sleeping. There is also a close-up shot of the participants' buttocks to demonstrate their comfort while wearing the advertised sanitary product (see **Figure 3**). The advertiser employs various angles as well. When the participants sleep, a high angle emphasizes their sleep during menstruation, giving the viewer more power than the participants. When they are awake, the advertiser uses an eye-level angle. However, there is a scene where the woman on the left is seated while the woman on the right is standing. The camerawork shoots the woman on the left using an eye-level angle, indicating an attempt to show equality between the viewer and the participant as she conveys the information. In contrast, the woman on the left is shot from a slightly low angle, indicating the participant has more power than the viewer (see **Figure 2**).



Fig. 3. The use of a high angle when the participants sleep in the Charm's advertisement.

A2.3 Compositional meanings

Regarding compositional meanings, the woman on the left is portrayed as the person with more information about the product. In contrast, the woman on the right is described as someone who needs the information. The woman on the left exudes a sense of expertise as evidenced by her body language and facial expressions. In contrast, the woman on the right appears to be less informed and in need of guidance from the woman beside her as conveyed through her confused expression and body language.

A2.4 Verbal mode

In terms of verbal mode, this advertisement employs several adjectives, such as “nyenyak” or “comfortable,” “basah” or “wet,” and “bocor” or “leaking.” The use of “leaking” is also a metaphorical representation. Additionally, there is a euphemism used in this commercial. The word “menstruation” is not explicitly stated. Instead, it is replaced with “pas dapet” or literally translated as “when you get (menstruation).”

A3: Softex

This advertisement lasts for 30 seconds and features three participants, all of whom are women. Additionally, there is a brief appearance by a male participant.

A3.1 Representational meanings

At the beginning of the video, all participants can be seen forming vectors with their arms toward their luggage. The participants are the actors who are performing the action of pulling the luggage. This action is also contextualized, with the doors of hotel rooms as the scene's background (see **Figure 4**). The women are portrayed with different hairstyles, one of them is wearing a hijab, and they also represent different body shapes. They appear to have a close relationship, depicted through their actions where they comfortably joke around and have physical contact.



Fig. 4. Contextualization and placement of men and women in Softex advertisement.

A3.2 Interactional meanings

In terms of interactional meanings, the women at the beginning exchange glances with each other and take a glance at the man in succession. The man turns his head to see the women briefly. After they enter their room, the women are depicted engaging in playful activities and making eye contact with the viewer (see **Figure 5**). This indicates that they also invited the viewer to join them. It suggests that this scene is a demand. There are various expressions that the participants made in this advertisement. The man at the beginning was turning his head, and he seemed curious about the sound that the women made. When taking a glance at the man, the women seem cautious with their voice which perhaps could make the man uncomfortable. The women display joyful expressions during their staycation and show concern when one of them falls from the bed.



Fig. 5. The participants make eye contact with the viewer.

This commercial utilizes medium to long shots and employs various camera angles. When entering the room, the scene is captured from a low angle to give the women power over the viewer. When they are playing around, the scene is captured from an eye-level angle, establishing equality between the participants and the viewer. Towards the end of the advertisement, a high angle is used to shoot the participants while sleeping, giving the viewer power over them (see **Figure 6**).



Fig. 6. The use of a high angle when the participants in the Softex's advertisement sleep.

A3.3 Compositional meanings

In terms of compositional meanings, unlike in A1, the man's position at the beginning of the commercial is on the left side of the frame, while the women occupy the center and right side (see **Figure 4**). However, the man's position, which is closer to the margin, makes the man's appearance in terms of information value unimportant, compared to the women who are positioned more prominently.

A3.4 Verbal mode

In terms of the verbal mode, the narrator's voice primarily focuses on promoting the features and benefits of the advertised product. The text's tone is also positive, indicated by the phrase "happy-happy kayak gini, atau bolak-balik gini?" (being happy like this, or jumping back and forth?).

4.2 The Interaction of visual and verbal discourse to reflect gender representations

The interaction between visual and verbal discourses in the three Indonesian sanitary pads TV advertisements plays a significant role in shaping gender representations and challenging traditional gender roles. These advertisements utilize a combination of visual and verbal elements to convey messages that specifically address the experiences and needs of women. The visual components in these advertisements, including the positioning of actors, their body language, and facial expressions, play important roles in conveying cues related to power dynamics, knowledge, and interpersonal relationships. These visual cues work together with the verbal elements to strengthen and emphasize gender-related experiences in sanitary pads advertisements. Further supplementary evidence regarding the findings can be outlined as follows.

The three advertisements demonstrate the power of combining visual and verbal elements to communicate messages related to women's experiences and needs. The visual elements, encompassing actor positioning, body language, and facial expressions, serve as important role in conveying notions related to power dynamics, knowledge, and relationships. For instance, in A1, the arrangement of the actor implies that men already acknowledge women's sanitary pad needs, reinforcing the idea of their understanding of the topic. These visual cues complement the verbal elements, further reinforcing gendered experiences and perspectives. In A1, the use of verbal narration explicitly states that men, including husbands, boyfriends, and brothers, already have knowledge about women's sanitary pad necessities. This interaction between verbal and visual cues supports the notion of men are aware of and actively participate in the menstrual hygiene agenda.

A2 shows another interplay between visual and verbal aspects. The visual representation of participants experiencing menstrual discomfort is accompanied by the use of euphemism in the verbal element. Instead of directly mentioning menstruation, the advertiser uses the phrase "pas dapet" or "when you get (menstruation)" as an alternative. This choice of words reflects cautious approach when dealing with the sensitive and often socially taboo topic of menstruation. The utilization of euphemism may present a concern because it perpetuates the existing norms that avoid recognizing menstruation as a natural part of women's lives. The use of euphemism indirectly gives impression that menstruation is something disturbing that is further strengthened by the depiction of blood as blue liquid in this advertisement. This approach may also aim to address cultural sensitivities and reduce potential discomfort or stigma associated with menstruation.

Moreover, the visual representations of women in A2 and A3 portrayed them in pairs or small groups of two and three. This visual arrangement serves to highlight the sense of unity and mutual support among women during their menstrual cycles. By featuring women in these groups, the advertisements communicate the notion of solidarity and highlight the significance of women supporting and understanding each other during their menstrual periods. The verbal discourses within these advertisements complement this visual portrayal by explicitly mentioning and promoting the participants' encouragement and support for each other during their menstrual periods. Through the combination of visual and verbal elements, the advertisements highlight the significance of companionship and shared experiences among women, reinforcing a positive and supportive narrative surrounding menstruation.

The interaction between visual and verbal discourses in these advertisements exemplifies how they collectively influence and shape gender representation by engaging both visual and linguistic cues. By strategically presenting the actors in certain positions and utilizing appropriate body language, the advertisements challenge traditional gender stereotypes and promote more inclusive representations of gender.

Discussion

Several representations of gender were discovered after analyzing the three advertisements. Sanitary pads are exclusively made for women. Therefore, it is common to see women as models or participants in sanitary products advertisements. However, two analyzed advertisements (A1 and A3) involve men in the commercials, especially in A1, where the men are positioned on the right side of the video. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) [10], the elements placed on the right are presented as “new,” which implies that the viewer does not yet know about them, necessitating special attention from the viewer. This refers to “the information at issue”. The appearance of men in sanitary pads in Indonesian TV advertisements is uncommon. However, there is a purpose in involving men in this advertisement, which is to actively engage men in challenging menstruation taboos and promote gender equality, which aligns with what Guo (2023) found in her study [9]. As they are portrayed as the actors who are standing in solidarity with women, it serves as a powerful tool of guidance aimed at educating and shaping the attitudes of men towards menstruation. This portrayal not only challenges existing taboos and societal norms surrounding menstruation but also suggests a vision for a more inclusive future, where menstruation is widely recognized as a natural and normal part of life, free from the burden of shame or stigma.

Moreover, two of the advertisements (A2 and A3) utilize a high angle, which focuses on women's buttocks. In these commercials, the use of high angles primarily highlights the comfort and effectiveness of the advertised product in providing protection during menstruation. It aims to assure potential consumers that the product is designed to be discreet and reliable, allowing women to move freely without any discomfort or worries about leakage. However, it is also essential to examine the way women's bodies are depicted in advertisements and ensure that they are portrayed respectfully without objectification. In the advertisements, the portrayal of women's bodies maintains a sense of respectfulness. This is achieved by presenting the women wearing loose-fitting pajamas rather than tight or revealing clothing. By opting for pajamas that do not cling tightly to the body, the commercials convey an intention to avoid objectifying or sexualizing women. The choice of clothing aligns with the aim of promoting sanitary pads as a functional and comfortable solution for menstruation, especially during sleep.

The examined advertisements feature multiple women who possess distinct hairstyles and body shapes. By showcasing women with varied hairstyles, the commercials acknowledge the vast array of personal choices and cultural preferences regarding hair styling among women. Additionally, portraying women with different body shapes challenges the prevailing notion of idealized beauty standards. Including diverse body shapes is intended to challenge societal norms and promote acceptance, self-esteem, and inclusivity. In doing so, the commercials contribute to the broader societal discourse surrounding body image, diversity, and the celebration of individuality.

Furthermore, within the examined advertisements, particularly in the case of A3, a distinctive element can be observed wherein women are portrayed in groups of three, engaging in social interactions and conversations. By featuring women in group dynamics, the commercial aims to display a sense of unity, support, and shared experiences within the context of menstruation. This is in line with the findings of Mahfouz (2021) as he found that women tend to stick together and enjoy engaging in social activities as a collective [14]. This portrayal of women in group settings not only fosters a sense of community and solidarity but also promotes the idea of breaking societal barriers and empowering women to embrace their menstrual experiences.

However, in terms of verbal mode, the use of euphemism in A2, by replacing the word "menstruation" with "*pas dapet*" (which is roughly translated into "when you get it"), can be seen as an attempt to navigate cultural sensitivities and address menstruation more indirectly and subtly. There exists a prevailing cultural taboo and discomfort associated with openly discussing menstruation, particularly in mass media. Furthermore, the use of euphemisms may also serve to comply with advertising regulations and guidelines that restrict explicit discussions of bodily functions. Advertisers may try to balance conveying the intended message about menstrual products and adhering to cultural norms and rules.

In summary, the interaction between the visual and verbal discourses in these Indonesian sanitary pads TV advertisements contributes to the representation of gender by challenging traditional gender roles, addressing specific experiences and needs of women, and promoting inclusivity. These advertisements play an important role in shaping societal perceptions, encouraging a more inclusive and empowering discourse regarding gender roles and women's experiences through the use of visual cues and language.

5 Conclusion

The interaction between visual and verbal aspects in three Indonesian sanitary pad TV advertisements contributes to reshaping gender representation, by challenging conventional gender roles and addressing women's experiences and necessities during menstruation. The visual components provide insights into power dynamics, knowledge, and relationships, while the verbal components reinforce gender-related experiences. Simultaneously, these visual representations challenge traditional gender stereotypes by highlighting the need to confront and rethink these cultural taboos. This is important to encourage more open and inclusive discussion. As societal perspectives continue to evolve, there is potential for future advertising to move beyond euphemism. This evolution can encourage greater acceptance and understanding of gender-related issues.

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