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An Analysis of Youth Perception on Women in a Malay Romance Film

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Abstract

The Malaysian film industry experienced trends driven by commercialization to cater to the growing Malay market. The need for audience pull for deteriorating Malay films created a shortage in plot diversity, resulting in stereotyped lead female roles to satisfy social expectations of a "traditional Malay woman". This exploratory analysis examined the perception of Malaysian youth on the lead female role represented in a Malay movie and its impact on the respondents' attitudes and beliefs. The researchers employed in-depth interviewing as well as focus group study with 33 individuals from rural and urban areas to capture their views. The findings indicated significant display of parasocial relationships that enhanced the engagement of audience members with fictional characters from the film.

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1. Introduction

The Malay film industry began in the 1950s in Singapore's Jalan Ampas and is widely received by cinemagoers through voluminous adaptations of familiar Malay folk tales. Films such as '*Bawang Putih Bawang Merah*', '*Hang Tuah*', '*Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup*' and '*Raja Bersiong*' saw socialization of the Malay spirit, a reinforced a sense

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of nationalism among the community (Mohd Mokhtar-Ritchie, 2011). Meanwhile, Fuziah and Faridah (2000) identified women in these films with two stereotypes the good-hearted, demure, submissive, domesticated and “ever-willing-to-sacrifice-everything” female; and the evil, scheming, conniving, home-wrecking, materialistic woman. The separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 significantly changed the momentum following massive closure of studios, rise in television popularity and other political factors that eventually forced film workers to test a larger Malay market in Kuala Lumpur compared to the Chinese majority in Singapore (Khoo, 2006). Emergence of video distribution between 1977 and 1986 saw a demand for foreign films from Hong Kong and Indonesia that offered diversity in content (Abu Hassan, 2012; Khoo, 2006). At the local front several films produced in the 1980s struggled with content by featuring patriotism and social issues such as *‘Mekanik’*, *‘Rozana Cinta 87’*, *‘Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan’* and epic docu-drama; *‘Bukit Kepong’* (Al-Attas, 1996). Abu Hassan (2012) argued trivial plots and casting untalented singers were reasons behind the deteriorating state of 1990s Malaysian cinema in the decade that followed. Filmmaker Yusof Haslam was nicknamed the “Six Million Dollar Man” after his successful directorial debut with *‘Sembilu’* that offered a combination of famous celebrities, Malay-centric dilemmas and religious constraints (Mohd Mokhtar-Ritchie: 2011; Khoo, 2006). Haslam’s films was similar to *Bollywood* movies as the variety of plots include family crises that distinguish the good or bad sibling, emphasize on the importance of a mother figure and display an excess of musical-inclined scenes (Van der Heide, 2006). Twenty years later, the trend of novel adaptations grew in generating film material. *‘Ombak Rindu’* based on the novel by Fauziah Ashari earned approximately RM 11 million in ticket sales (Murai, 2011). Its director Osman Ali cast heartthrob Aaron Aziz as the male lead, Hariz and renowned prima donna Maya Karin as the female lead, Izzah. Hafiz and Adira who are popular singers from reality television show called *‘Akademi Fantasia’* collaborated on the film’s theme song and music video with the same title, generating an initial buzz for audiences to watch the film. Osman Ali was criticized on the image of Izzah in the film because the novel version of Izzah did not wear hijab or veil. Osman Ali insisted that his portrayal of Izzah and Hariz in the film was purposefully made into two extremes, “the bad” and “the good” which in the end Izzah conquers evil (wins Hariz’s heart) with her patience (Ahmad, 2011).

2. Significance of study

This preliminary study examined the perceptions of youth audiences towards women featured in Malay romance films. The research looked into the participation of youths in parasocial relationships with characters of the film *‘Ombak Rindu’* to determine reasons behind their resonance. New insights gathered in this research will be used to further support previous studies and highlight any disruptive themes that may surface from the findings for the benefit of the society in terms of media use.

3. Theoretical framework

Television and film networks as well as producers actively seek attractive characters that are relatable to audience with hopes that audiences will form relationships with these characters. Uses and gratifications research has indicated that some audiences’ exhibit great amount of affinity with the medium and with the characters they watch (Rubin & McHugh, 1987) These relationships resemble interpersonal relationships in many ways, and linked intimately to Horton and Wohl’s (1956) concept of parasocial interaction. Parasocial interaction is a type of intimate, friend like relationship that occurs between a mediated persona or character with the audience. Parasocial interaction might be a functional alternative to interpersonal relationships for some people (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

4. Literature review

It is established in mass communication theory and research that the meaning of media content to the audience does not reside in either the media content or the audience but in the interaction between the two. Defined as one side interaction between mediated characters and viewers, Horton and Wohl introduced the concept of parasocial interaction in 1956. As argued, a bond of intimacy is developed with media personalities through shared experiences existing only through viewing of the personality or persona over time (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). A study by Rubin and Step (Hall et al., 2007) found that parasocial interactions with talk show hosts resulted in attitude and behaviour changes. It is possible that media characters have influential power because listeners and

viewers perceive them as more credible and relatable. This is further strengthened by Hall et al. (2007) findings that parasocial interaction is likely to lead to the formation of beliefs and attitudes consistent with a public role model. The study attempted to indicate that identification was conceptualised as the process of seeing oneself as similar to another and adopting that person's attitude, values and behaviours. As such, the idea is similar to this study which examined the penetration of parasocial relationships on the perception of Malaysian youth and its impact on their attitudes and beliefs due to the "connection" that they have made with the lead female role represented in Malay movies namely in '*Ombak Rindu*'. The study also found that parasocial interaction with lead characters impacted media consumption as those with strong parasocial interaction with the lead female roles in '*Ombak Rindu*' actively sought out media coverage of the characters. The outcome of parasocial interaction identified in this study is the adoption of the character's attitudes. Specifically, those who had strong 'connection' with the lead female roles adopted their views and beliefs. Another concept that warrants further explanation is audience involvement, whereby audience members are "cognitively and affectively invested" (Hall et al, 2007). Thus, if audience members are highly absorbed in a media program, it seems likely that they would be engaging in parasocial interaction with characters because they are affectively experiencing what the characters are experiencing. Television and film creators may use methods such as having actors address the viewers or fans or staging elaborate events such as press screenings or press conferences held prior to the release of the film, allowing the media as well as the audience (fans) to see the actors outside of a mediated environment: which is *in the real world*. '*Ombak Rindu*' is no different in this sense despite being a local Malay offering. A press conference was held on 22nd November 2011 where members of the media had the opportunity to meet the "characters" besides having an advance screening of the film. The viewers were not overlooked; where some 500 invited guests graced the Gala Premiere of the movie held on 29 November 2011 (GSC Movies, 2011) They had the opportunity to meet main cast, director and producers of the film.

Studies have found when characters engage with the audience directly; a stronger parasocial relationship is developed (Auter, 1992). Horton and Wohl (1956) further add that by speaking to the audience directly, it encourages the audience to respond and engage in an active relationship. Interestingly, more recent research on parasocial theory indicates, in fact; that this type of relationship have been found to be more of a compliment to social relationships, rather than a compensation for them (Hall et al., 2007). He adds that personality traits that are conducive in one's interpersonal relationships would also help facilitate parasocial relationships thus expanding one's social network (Hall et al., 2007). Another antecedent for parasocial relationships to occur is the idea that audiences are attracted to these media characters in some way. People anticipate that others, both in their social network and on film / television, who are similar to themselves, will provide rewarding interactions, which is the reason behind the attraction (Hall et al, 2007). Similarity in physical attributes is not what draws these audiences to these characters; it is more that they perceive these characters as realistic individuals since there is a similarity in attitudes.

5. Methodology

In this study, researchers employed an analysis that integrates in-depth interviewing as well as focus group study. The researchers were able to present a precise description of the respondents' views on the film '*Ombak Rindu*' and the meaning in which was portrayed. The sample for this study consisted of youths aged between 18 and 30 years in both the urban and rural areas. Due to the nature of this study, purposive sampling was used. The researcher conducted three (3) focus group sessions with each session consisting of six (6) respondents; three (3) males and three (3) females. The total number of respondents for the focus group study was 18 respondents; 15 local and three (3) International respondents. The respondents selected for the focus group were urban, tertiary level undergraduate and represented the Malay, Chinese and Indian demographic as well as International. Before the discussion began, the movie '*Ombak Rindu*' was screened for the respondents and a list of semi-structured focus group questions were then asked. The in-depth interview technique was also incorporated in this study to acquire an in-depth understanding of the views on a smaller scale. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight (8) selected respondents in the Klang Valley (urban) and Kota Tinggi (rural) areas. The researchers selected eight (8) interviewees consisting of six (6) females and two (2) males; both professional and unprofessional. The interviewees were contacted personally to make appointments for the interview session. Semi-structured questions for the interview were pre-prepared. The interviews were conducted personally and the interviewer asked questions from a list of 17 standard questions. The interviewer took field notes and recorded each interview session. In-depth

interviewing was helpful to collect data on this study. Furthermore, in-depth interviews can be manipulated to customize to individual respondents (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). Various responses were gathered to identify the effects of the prevalence on this film on human relationships. The data collected were analysed separately to identify recurring themes.

6. Analysis and discussion

6.1 Emergence of parasocial relations in film narrative

Findings revealed that 69% of respondents felt the relationship of Izzah and Hariz is unrealistic as it is uncommon to keep marriages a secret and to marry a complete stranger. Nonetheless 23% of respondents that it is possible as indicated in the following citations:

Yes, because love happens expectantly and a person's mind and heart can change at any moment.

Yes, dependent on how long the relationship will last within the society and culture.

Yes, if it was in the past, not in contemporary times.

Yes, their relationships are similar to couples with similar problems.

Yes, in polygamy point of view would be alright, but these days husbands stick to one wife.

Several respondents felt she should have escaped after her first encounter with Hariz instead of seeking marriage to make it rape as 'halal' (permissible by God)" as it is unfair to the victim, and due to this forced marriage, responsibility of husband and wife may be neglected. Even so, it is noted that a majority of female respondents from rural areas and tertiary undergraduates however felts that Izzah did the right thing as highlighted by the following respondents:

According to Islamic laws, they should be married to abstain from sin.

It is a way to let the man be responsible for what he did.

Shows how religious and forgiving she is.

She is noble.

Mila, who is a key character in the film was regarded by 73.1% respondents as a "good person" despite her antagonist role. She is seen as a strong, determined woman who was forgiving and good hearted as highlighted in Excerpt 3. The rural respondents once again felt that she was misled but Hariz, her husband who failed to give her attention could have guided her:

Mila is a good person, she did not know he was married and loved him. She has the annoying personality but has a good side.

Good. She insisted to file for divorce from Hariz for him to marry his true love.

A total of 84.6% of respondents agreed that religion played an ultimate role in shaping the storyline of the film, as the audience felt that religion was portrayed as very important to improve and increase faith in relationships as well as legalises a marriage:

The storyline revolved around submission to Allah and softening Hariz's heart and becoming more of a gentleman than forcing his way.

Religion is the key linkage in the film, Hariz sees Izzah's deep belief in faith.

However only one respondent felt differently:

There is no religion that condones a criminal act. Only people are responsible for their own actions.

6.2 Resonance through media socialization

Romance is a popular movie genre where audiences are able to gauge and apply lifelong lessons they are exposed to in their own relationships. Youth respondents believed 'Ombak Rindu' taught them to learn from mistakes, increase their compassion and respect for others. It is also an eye-opener where youths should not take love and the idea of sex for granted, as well showing romance can occur in many settings. Most importantly, the respondents considered Izzah as a "heroine or role model". Only 26.9% of respondents disagreed and felt that the movie is simply fictional and could only affect those with similar experiences to the character.

There 76.9% of respondents agreed that films in general have significant influence on how youths manage their relationships. Films have the tendency to illustrate how one should solve problems and communicate to a significant other. Furthermore, some respondents expressed that even though films are fictional, the plot may have been inspired by real-life experiences. Meanwhile, 65.4% of respondents based on their personal development felt that films have influenced their beliefs and attitudes (Figure 3), because films help spread awareness of social issues to audiences. By doing this, films transmit important values for a person's betterment and provide a different perspective in his or her life. It may also change certain philosophies that a person may have. The following statement supports this view:

Films play an important role in my life. I watch movies for the sake of entertainment but at the same time I get influenced by them and mimic or replicate what I see.

Sometimes, films give me inspiration to seek God further and to be a better person. Films has changed me to better person in all aspects and to help anyone that I can.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Parasocial relations suggest that people's values and outlooks can be affected by their usage of media. After studying the data and interpreting its results, Horton and Wohl's theory is very much applicable in modern romance films. Respondents were significantly able to; 1) identify with familiar themes that are relatable to their own culture and community, 2) desire and admire characters that bring positive feelings to the audiences. There is a solid relationship between the main characters' traits, behavior and the development of the story a dependency that is typically seen as the *justification* in the minds of the audience when the ending is revealed (Appel, 2008). This "storytelling" theory concerns the usage of various media where the audiences are often exposed to fictitious characters, environments and settings which allow them to immerse themselves into "narrative transportation", a process whereby readers, listeners, or viewers are absorbed into the world of the narrative. In such a state, viewers become "engrossed in the story and are highly involved and cognitively engaged, react emotionally, and have vivid thoughts" (Shrum et al, 2010).

This exploratory study yielded areas that can be detailed for future research. From the findings, the experience of watching films creates significant expectations and ideals among youths. Make-belief settings portray a world that is guided by ideal justice as compared to how the real world would work. A *story* is a narrative with interdependent (or causal) chain of events that leads to a resolution (Chatman, 1978; Appel, 2008) where the fictional environments provide entertainment and stimulate moral evaluation from audiences. Even though Malay Muslim women have stepped as different characters in the media, they are still bound by traditions to abide by the stereotypes of gender roles. Representations of the modern Malay Muslim women of the 1990s that include female characters in films and Malaysian literary texts show cultural tensions and confusion about gender and sexuality (Khoo, 2006). Izzah gives a generalization of how Malay Muslim women and Asians in general should react in a personal relationship through 'Ombak Rindu'. The idea of relenting as a martyr shows sides of oppressiveness related to cultural believes that shapes an audience's (who are a large majority of women) attitude towards the idea as he or she is immersed in parasocial interactions. Izzah's Muslim identity created a generalization that women should accept whatever God has bestowed upon them. Development of parasocial relationship among audiences can also be attributed to the sexual appeal of the film's characters (Rubin & Perse, 1987).

In this study, respondents felt that overall; the strength of Izzah is attributed to her religiosity that shaped the storyline of 'Ombak Rindu'. As such, this provides them gratification in resonance and reinforcing the parasocial relationship that they have established with characters of the film.

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