A Cross-Cultural Study of Persuasive Strategies in Relationship Advice Articles in Women's Magazines

Reem A. Lulu
reemadiblulu@gmail.com
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences,
Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei

Sharifah Nurul Huda Alkaff
sharifah.alkaff@ubd.edu.bn
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences,
Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei

ABSTRACT

Women's magazines have become the subject of an increasing scholarly exploration as they are widely seen as mirrors of social change in society. They typically cover a variety of topics but one enduring genre is the relationship advice genre. This study presents a cross-cultural analysis of the linguistic constructions of articles in relationship advice columns in women's magazines. We examine the strategies, which are employed by them to persuade the reader to accept the advice given. We also examine the positioning of the implied reader in these texts by the writers of these articles. Data drawn from six English-language women's magazines from three contexts which are, the US, Malaysia and the Middle East, was analysed with reference to the linguistic features used as persuasive strategies by the producers of texts, as investigated by several Discourse Analysis (DA) scholars. The findings of the study reveal that in all three contexts, the writers of advice articles in women's magazines are often seen in a 'balancing act' as they set themselves up as experts while at the same time constructing themselves as a friend of the reader. However, we also found evidence of differences in how the reader is positioned as well as the strategies of persuasion used in the different contexts which we believe is attributed to the differences in the cultural norms and values of the respective societies.

Keywords: Media; Women's Magazines; Relationship Advice; Culture; Cross-Cultural Analysis

INTRODUCTION

According to Talbot (2010), women's magazines first appeared in Britain in the late 17th century, catering to upper-class women who were literate and had time on their hands to indulge in reading. A century later, the readership of these publications was expanded to include middle-class women who were wives and mothers doing their own domestic work. Favaro and Gill (2018) describe women's magazines as 'remarkably resilient'. They state that these publications have 'maintained high levels of popularity across time and space, in spite of significant economic and industry challenges…and in the face of ongoing critique' (p. 40). More importantly, like other forms of popular culture they are often regarded as mirrors of social change, as stated by Ytre-Arne (2011). These facts should correlate with a considerable body of research into their role in the media industries from various perspectives. However, the vast majority of studies on women's magazines tend to focus on advertisements, mainly beauty advertisements, in these publications (Brown & Knight, 2015; Zhao & Zhu, 2015;

Iqbal et al., 2014). Other aspects of these magazines tend to be relatively under-represented in the literature.

Among the areas that have been under-researched are the relationship advice articles of these magazines. These refer to articles found in many women's magazines in sections with headings such as 'Sex and Relationships' or 'Love and Sex'. The relatively few studies in this area investigate different aspects of the genre such as the dominant themes of such articles (Gill, 2010; Gupta et al., 2008; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003) or discourse analysis of these articles (Kauppinen, 2013). Other scholars explore the linguistic constructions of advice articles such as Lorenset (2012), who examines the verbal and visual aspects of advice articles sourced from the websites of two women's magazines, the Brazilian magazine *Nova*, and the American magazine *Cosmopolitan*. According to Lorenset, one of the main goals of the writers of these articles is to establish rapport with the readers in order to gain their approval and trust. They utilise strategies such as presenting questions to the readers as a way of interaction, using direct address through the pronoun *'you'*, and adopting the use of informal language to be read and understood by the majority of readers.

Conradie (2011) explores the linguistic construction of gender ideology in three issues of *Cosmopolitan*, based on an article each on psychology, relationships and sex. The findings reveal that the advice articles aim to warn women about a variety of pressures and dangerous expectations of a problem. This was presented by constructing *Cosmo* as the readers' friend who understands all the threats and problems to the successful performance of femininity. This appears in the use of unmodified verbs such as *'is'*, inclusive pronouns *'we'* and *'our'*, and the use of the pronoun *'you'* that simulates friendly conversations with the reader. It is also found that *Cosmopolitan's* advice is directed at individual women who might influence their society, for example, the use of inclusive pronouns underpin the construction of women as 'a homogenous group'. Erjavec (2006) investigates the textual devices which are used to construct and uphold commonly-held views of female sexuality in relationship advice articles in the Slovenian edition of *Cosmopolitan*. She found three main discourse strategies in the texts (prescriptive, pseudo-scientific and pseudo-intimate). Another study on the genre of relationship articles in Flemish women's magazines was conducted by Temmerman, Van De Voorde & Coesemans (2018) on a lexical analysis of the naming practices which are used to refer to women and men, and consequently, their mutual relationships. Their diachronic study suggests that women's relationships with men are still integral to the ethos of these magazines but the focus on marriage has declined.

The studies cited, with the exception of Lorenset (2012), are all located in one context. Few studies, nevertheless, have been carried out with a cross-cultural perspective on relationship advice articles in women's magazines. Among these are Machin and Van Leeuwen's (2003) study which focuses on advice and feature articles on relationships, sexuality and work in several international editions of *Cosmopolitan.* They find that despite the existence of 'local accents', the problem-solution discourse schema of such articles is a 'global' one shared by all the editions. A more recent study by Lulu and Alkaff (2018) investigate the prevailing values and messages in the relationship columns of women's magazines from three different contexts in terms of what these magazines promote to their readers and the way they present such values in relation to the values and norms of the respective society.

The present study is one of the few studies that attempt a cross-cultural analysis of the linguistic constructions of persuasive strategies in relationship advice articles in women's magazines. According to Perloff (cited in Naksawat, Akkakoson & Chek, 2016) persuasion can be described as 'a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behavior regarding an issue through the transmission of a message, in an atmosphere of free choice'. In this paper, we will specifically examine the

strategies which are employed by these magazines to persuade the reader to accept the advice given. We will also examine the positioning of the implied reader in these articles by the magazines' writers and editorial staff. Data will be drawn from six English-language women's magazines from three contexts which are, the US, Malaysia and the Middle East. Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

(i) What are the strategies used to persuade or influence the reader of these articles?
(ii) How do these magazines position the implied reader of their articles?
(iii) Can differences, if any, in (i) and (ii) above that are found in the different contexts be attributed to the differences in the cultural norms and values of the respective societies?

This study is significant because as stated, there is a relative dearth of cross-cultural studies on women's magazines presently. More cross-cultural studies such as this study are needed in order to gain better insights on the role of women's magazines in non-Western contexts as very little is currently known about them. More studies are also needed on home-grown magazines in a particular context as the majority of studies focus on international magazines. Analysing home-grown magazines would provide better insights and understanding on the values that they seek to promote in relation to the predominant values or norms of the society it is set in rather than analysing local editions of international magazines. The latter probably reflects the ethos of the international publishing companies more than that of the local society, as asserted by Machin and Van Leeuwen (2003). Similar sentiments are expressed by Kitsa and Mudra (2018) in their study on contemporary women's magazines in the Ukraine. They feel that foreign publications tend to emphasise issues and ideas emanating from largely Western countries. They state that 'while Ukrainian national issues may be found within the pages of glossy magazines, they are largely marginalized against a backdrop of content emanating from outside the country' (p. 2).

METHODOLOGY

This study looks at women's magazines in the following regions: Malaysia, the US, and the Middle East (Egypt and UAE). Six women's magazines, two from each context, were selected for this study. All the magazines are home grown English-language magazines with origins from the respective contexts. Although the magazines that are analysed are in the English language, which is not the first language in Malaysia and the Middle East, we believe that as they are magazines produced by local publishing companies in each of the contexts, rather than local editions of international magazines, they would probably reflect the cultural norms and values of each society better than the latter.

The two US women's magazines chosen are *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*. *Cosmopolitan* is the biggest-selling women's magazine in the US and the world with 61 international editions around the world. *Marie Claire* is a close competitor of *Cosmopolitan* in terms of popularity, both in the US and overseas (http://www.hearst.com/magazines). Women's magazines in the US are considered as the most powerful and culturally influential magazines with the widest publishing impact. The two Malaysian women's magazines selected are *Female* and *Her World*. *Female* is Malaysia's top- selling lifestyle magazine and *Her World* is the first home-grown English language women's lifestyle magazine in Malaysia (https://www.bluinc.com.my). The two Middle Eastern women's magazines selected are *Ahlan* (UAE) and *What Women Want* (Egypt). The former is the first home-grown English language lifestyle women's magazine to be established in the Middle East (https://www.itp.com/brands/ahlan) while the latter is one of the leading lifestyle English

language women's magazine in Egypt (http://whatwomenwant-mag.com). Two countries are selected rather than one, from the Middle East, because few locally produced English language women's magazines exist in the region. The majority of women's magazines available in the Middle East are either in the Arabic language or are local editions of international magazines. Although the Middle East context consists of two separate countries, we feel that this is justified as we believe most Middle Eastern countries share similar traits in terms of linguistic and cultural elements, as confirmed by many scholars (Moghadam, 2004; Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000; Barakat, 1993 & Nydell, 2012). The names of the magazines are represented in the findings section of this paper through the use of initials for brevity.

Sixty articles from the relationship advice sections of each magazine were selected for this study, ten from each magazine. The articles were taken from the sections in the magazines that are labelled as *Sex and Relationship (Cosmopolitan), Love and Sex (Marie Claire), Her Relationship (Her World), Relationships and Sex (Female), Relationship (Ahlan)* and *Sex and Relationship (What Women Want)*. All the articles were downloaded from the online websites of the respective magazines and analysed using a Discourse Analysis (DA) framework. When analysing the data, we referred to a number of studies that examine linguistic features that function as strategies of persuasion in advice texts. These strategies include the following: (1) pronouns, as studied by (Fairclough, 1989, 2001; Fowler & Kress, 1979; Talbot, 1992, 1995), (2) imperatives (Fairclough, 1989), (3) modality (Fairclough, 1989), (4) questions (McLoughlin, 2000), (5) intimate interaction with the reader (Erjavec, 2006; Stoll, 1998), and (6) intimate vocabulary (Erjavec, 2006). More information is provided about each of these strategies in the next section.

In order to ensure reliability and validity, the data was first examined by the researchers separately. Both researchers then discussed the results of their initial analysis together. The data was examined to firstly, investigate if these strategies are found in our texts and secondly, if there are differences in how these strategies are utilised in different cultural contexts. We also examined the data to investigate how the writer positions herself when persuading the readers to accept her advice in each of the three contexts.

FINDINGS

The six persuasion strategies which are examined in the relationship advice articles studied are discussed in detail in the following sections:

PRONOUNS

The findings reveal several positions the writer can take by making use of pronouns. Table 1 below shows the types and frequencies of pronouns that are used as a persuasive advice strategy in these women's magazines.

TABLE 1. Types and frequencies of pronouns as a persuasive advice strategy

Strategy (Pronouns)	**Number of Occurrences**			**Examples**
	US	**Malaysia**	**ME**	
You/your	904	370	721	*Cut back on expensive activities during <u>your</u> visits* (CP) *Announce <u>your</u> presence. <u>You</u> are <u>your</u> brand and <u>you</u> are one in a million* (F)
Inclusive 'we' (writer and reader)	38	24	68	*<u>We</u> need all the relationships in <u>our</u> life…to feel whole* (AH) *…a lot of things are contrary to what <u>we</u> women thought* (F)

Exclusive 'we' representing expert or authority	4	5	13	*...we have put together a list of signs to make it easier to detect some people's…lack of personal hygiene* (WW) *We've got it all covered* (MC)
Exclusive 'we' acting as intermediary	0	6	2	*We probed our sex gurus to give up the details on what women never knew about men and sex* (HW) *So we decided to ask a couple of your local Malaysian guys when they think a woman should ditch a guy…*(F)
Exclusive 'we' representing other social groups	11	3	-	*We men wake up ready to go, so to speak* (MC)
Shifting from one to another	-	3	-	*..it's totally not surprising for us ladies to have a male best friend. But we think it really depends on your man's character too…*(F)

These are discussed in detail below:

(i) The second-person singular pronoun 'you'

The writer addresses the implied reader directly using the second-person singular pronoun 'you', and the possessive singular determiner 'your' to construct a friendly relationship with the reader. Such addressing of readers on an individual basis is referred to as 'synthetic personalization', (Fairclough, 1989, p. 62). This direct address also constructs an illusion of intimacy and friendliness, and it closes a 'discursive gap' (Fowler, 1991, p. 47) between the writers of these advice articles and their readers. There are many occurrences of the pronoun 'you' and the determiner 'your' in the headline and/or the sub-headlines of the articles studied, perhaps to imply a sense of attention and importance which is turned to the reader. They are also similarly used in the body of the text to address the individual reader when presenting specific problems and to create an impression of friendship and solidarity with them. That is, the writer establishes herself/ himself as a friend of the reader who can understand her problems and concerns as in the following example: *...you're in a relationship with an amazing…a dream guy… you're ready for the next step. But before you start dropping hints about marriage…, you've already got a dilemma on your hands.* (AH). It is worth noting that the use of 'you/your' is generic, since they do not refer to anybody in particular, however, the reader is made to feel that this specific problem with its solution applies to her personally.

(ii) Inclusive 'we'

Other pronouns found in the data are the first-person plural pronoun 'we'/ 'us' and the possessive plural determiner 'our'. The pronoun 'we' can take the form of inclusive 'we' which refers to the writer and the readers, or all women. The inclusive 'we' suggests that both the producer of the texts and the readers belong to the same homogenous social group, that is, women. According to Fairclough (2001), elements of democracy and equality are transmitted by making use of the inclusive 'we' as the writer positions herself as a member of the same group who knows what women want; their problems and needs. In the following example, *'...we all, as women, have a couple of dating boundaries for guys…'* (F), the inclusive 'we' is made explicit as it is followed by the word *'all'* and *'women'*. Our findings reveal that this form is found most often in the Middle Eastern data, as shown in Table 1 above.

(iii) Exclusive 'we' representing expert or authority

The writers of the articles sometimes distance themselves from the reader by making use of the exclusive pronoun 'we' (McLoughlin, 2000, p. 70). By making use of the exclusive 'we', the writers are talking about themselves and the editorial staff of the magazine but excluding

the readers. In this sense, the writer and the magazine staff are presented as a unified whole which evokes an atmosphere of companionship as the writer and her colleagues belong to a very close social group (Fowler & Kress, 1979). As shown in the examples in the table above, the writers take the expert role which implies their authority and their expertise on a specific social issue. For example, '*We show you how to do it and live life to the fullest'* (AH).

As in the previous example, this form is again most common in the Middle Eastern data, as shown in Table 1.

(iv) Exclusive 'we' acting as intermediary

The exclusive 'we' which represents the writers and the editorial voice may act as an intermediary for the readers to solicit advice from other experts, whether relationship gurus or men in general when dealing with problems or issues related to the male sex. This appears in six articles in the Malaysian data and two articles in the Middle Eastern ones but is not found in the US data (see Table 1). In this case, the writer is presented as a friend to the reader in an equal relationship as both are not experts and, thus, in need of advice. For example, '*We probed our sex gurus to give up the details on what women never knew about men and sex'* (HW)

(v) Exclusive 'we' representing other social groups

It is found that in some texts the exclusive 'we' might include the writer and other groups, basically men, but not women. This happens specifically when the writer of the text is a man, as shown in the following examples:

Make it obvious to us when you aren't really after the orgasm so that we don't end up in a situation where we're going at it like a choo-choo train (F)

We men wake up ready to go, so to speak (MC)

The exclusive pronoun 'we' in the first example refers to the male contributor of *Female* magazine 'Deric Yang' and the men as a homogenous group, while the second example refers to the male expert of *Marie Claire* 'Lodro Rinzler' and his male friends who share their opinions with him related to the ways women and their men can have the *best sex ever*. The exclusive 'we' is made explicit in the second example as it is followed by the word *'men'*. It is noted that, 'we' is exclusive from the point of view that it excludes women, as readers, from the men's group, however, it can be inclusive in a sense as it would include their boyfriends/husbands among the 'we' referred to. In this sense, the exclusive 'we' evokes the sense of companionship of the male writer and the male group and helps the implied reader to understand what men as a homogenous group feel about specific sexual and relationship issues. This form is found in the US and Malaysian magazines but not in the Middle Eastern magazines.

(vi) Shifting from one to other

It is noted that a pronominal shift can occur from the inclusive 'we'/'us' to exclusive 'we' within the same paragraph, hence the writer's role or stance can change from a friend of the reader to an expert, as shown in the following example:

While we all, as women, have a couple of dating boundaries for guys, we wondered if any of them can be legitly accepted from a man's point of view as well …So we decided to ask a couple of your local Malaysian guys when they think a woman should ditch a guy… (F).

This feature is less common as only three instances are found in the Malaysian magazines. Perhaps frequent shifting of roles of the writer can be confusing to the reader, thus their use has been minimised.

IMPERATIVES

By making use of imperatives, the writer is in a position of authority since he/she constitutes himself/herself as an expert who instructs and guides readers on specific issues. Fairclough (1989, p. 126) states that the use of imperatives also implies that the writer is in the position of asking something of the reader, while the reader is a compliant actor. Portner (2007, p. 381) states that the pragmatic meaning of imperatives is that the speaker/writer tries *'to impose a commitment on someone else'*. Table 2 below shows the types and frequencies of imperatives that are used as a persuasive advice strategy in these women's magazines.

TABLE 2. Types and frequencies of imperatives as a persuasive advice strategy

Strategy/Imperatives	**Number of Occurrences**			**Examples**
	US	**Malaysia**	**ME**	
Positive	80	182	78	*Be lovable/ Put on that red lipstick/ Have fun/ Strut your stuff* (F)
Negative	37	15	13	*Don't ask your man to work on the house/ Do not criticise your man for the work he has done* (HW) *Don't avoid confrontation* (AH)
Adverbs hedges *(Do)*	3	4	2	*Do something to feel sexy* (F) *Do it more often* (MC)
Downgraders hedges (*Just, Try, Think, Remember*)	19	10	13	*Just lead the way and show him what you like…* (F) *Try placing a cushion under the bottom of your back…* (WW) *Think back to before you were married* (HW) *Remember, whatever you give attention to…, you will get more of* (WW)
Giving reasons hedges	9	17	8	*Play some sensual music, it'll put you in the mood* (F)
Inclusive strategy hedges	6	-	5	*Let's just admit it* (AH) *Let's face it* (CP) Let's try pink! (WW)

As shown in Table 2 above, imperatives are frequently used in the advice articles analysed but more imperatives are found in the Malaysian data than in the US and the Middle Eastern ones because the majority of the Malaysian articles have a bullet point format with shorter sentences compared to the US and the Middle Eastern texts. Furthermore, positive imperatives appear to be used more than negative ones.

The findings also reveal that the writers tend to use mitigated forms of directives to present their solutions by using verbs such as *'try'*, *'remember'*, *'just'*, and *'think'*. These mitigated forms reduce the tone of the authority as the writer seems to have two roles as (a) an expert and (b) a friend. These mitigated forms are also known as 'downgraders'. According to Jan and Pung (2014, p. 143), downgraders "implied some allowance given to the advice-recipient whether to act on the given advice", and thus, there is a "weakening of the imperative's commanding force".

In general, we find that the imperatives found in the three contexts are not constructed merely as 'orders' to women but rather as suggestions. It is also worth noting that the frequent use of imperatives in the advice articles studied could be interpreted as a friendly

way of interacting with the reader rather than an authoritative way. Therefore, it could be stated that by making use of imperatives, the writer positions herself/himself as both a friend and an expert of specific relationship matters, who can help readers solve their problems if they follow his/her advice.

MODALITY

Modality is presented by modal auxiliary verbs such as '*must', 'should', 'can'* and '*cannot*', among others (Fairclough, 1989, p. 127). Table 3 below shows the types and frequencies of modality that are used as a persuasive advice strategy in these women's magazines.

TABLE 3. Types and frequencies of modality as a persuasive advice strategy

Strategy/Modality	**Number of Occurrences**			**Examples**
	US	**Malaysia**	**ME**	
Positive (medium strength modality) *Should/need to/have to/ought to*	35	17	35	*...you should treat your body and soul with care* (WW) *...you really ought to look at where you fall in this dynamic* (MC)
Negative (medium strength modality) *Shouldn't/ don't have to/don't need to*	9	1	7	*You don't have to justify not going on that third OkCupid date…* (CP) *You don't need to bring them up…* (MC)
Positive (modality which construct a degree of strong authority) *must*	1	3	5	*here are the 10 things you must try for mind-blowing sex* (HW) *you must learn how to weather storms as a team* (AH) *women must put themselves on a pedestal* (CP)
Negative (modality which construct a degree of strong authority) *mustn't*	0	0	0	
Positive (modality which associates with possibilities and abilities) *Can/could*	18	19	14	*You could have him over to your place…* (MC) *...you can decide if you want to move forward…* (AH)
Negative (modality which associates with possibilities and abilities) *Can't/couldn't*	9	1	7	*You can't rely on missionary (again) when you're doing it in the car* (CP)

It is found that deontic modality is used in the advice articles studied. This modality deals with the meanings of necessity (obligation) and possibility of acts performed by morally responsible agents (Lyons, 1977, p. 823), and it is concerned with the meaning lying between "do it" or "don't do it". It is found that the modals which prevail in the texts studied construct the relational meaning of obligation which is expressed by the modal auxiliaries *'must'*, '*should'*, *'ought to'*, *'have to'*, and *'need to'*; and the negative forms of the modal auxiliaries such as *'should not'*, *'don't have to'*, and *'don't need to'*.

According to Fowler (1991, 1986), when deontic modality is used the writer stipulates that the target audience in a proposition ought to perform a specific action. Obligation modality signals *'implicit authority claims and implicit power relations'* (Fairclough, 1989, p. 127), and hence, it can be argued that by making use of deontic modality which denotes obligation, the women's magazines studied construct their authority to guide and instruct their readers, that is, the writer takes the role of an expert in the texts. As shown in Table 3 above, positive modality appears to be used more than the negative ones.

The findings reveal that the modal *'must'* only appears in a few examples compared to other modals which denote obligation, which are *'should'*, *'have to'*, *'need to'*, and *'ought to'*. This probably refers to the fact that the modal '*must*' constructs a degree of strong authority of an utterance, unlike the other forms of modals, which denote obligation, that are characterised by having medium strength modality (Nordlinger & Traugott, 1997, p. 299). Hence, the producer of the text is seen as trying to mitigate the tone of the authority by using fewer examples of the modal *'must'*.

Other deontic modality found in the advice articles analysed include *'can'* and *'could'* which are associated with possibilities and abilities to do something on the target audience. Unlike the obligation modality discussed in the previous paragraph, this kind of modality in the texts will make the advice appear less authoritative. In this case, it can be argued that the writer has the role of a friend. There are many examples of these types of modals in all three contexts (see Table 3), for example: '*you can also experiment with the tempo and angle that brings you the most satisfaction'* (HW).

QUESTIONS

The findings reveal that the writers of advice articles pose questions to readers in order to engage them in informal conversations. According to Coates (1996, p. 202), using questions is one of the ways in which writers can avoid talking like an expert. The use of questions is a typical feature of women's magazines, where the producer of the text anticipates that the reader is in need of advice, and hence, he/she stimulates a problem and offers a solution (McLoughlin, 2000, p. 20). The use of questions also indicates that the magazines believe that their readers have some information and they recognise that their readers have conditions to comment the questioning (Zucco & Minayo, 2009). This arouses the curiosity of the reader while reading such advice articles. Table 4 below shows the types and frequencies of questions that are used as a persuasive advice strategy in these women's magazines.

TABLE 4. Types and frequencies of questions as a persuasive advice strategy

Strategy/Questions	**Number of Occurrences**			**Examples**
	US	**Malaysia**	**ME**	
Q/A format	1	0	0	*How do I get out of this relationship limbo?* (CP)
Q anticipated by the writer	27	6	14	*...do online connections really work? Is it as good, or better, than the spark you feel when you befriend or chat with someone for the first time?...Can you really find friendships on the Internet?* (AH)
Introspective questions	14	1	5	*You have to ask yourself: can you deal with whatever answers you find? If you stay with him after finding out he's cheated, will you still be happy?* (HW) *Think about it this way: What if your only issue is the belief that you have issues and that they're keeping you from a relationship? What if you stopped defining yourself...? What if you instead saw yourself...?...* (CP)

These are discussed in detail below:

(i) Questions which are found in texts with a question/answer format. Only one article is found in the entire data which follows this format, which is, "5 Secrets to Making Your Long-Distance Relationship Work" (CP) where the writer poses five questions as problems women may face in long distance relationship.

(ii) Questions which are anticipated by the writer and raised to the readers as problems that are followed by specific solutions or answers by the writer, or by appealing to authorities or testimonies. An example of these questions as follows:
There are no set rules about (over)emoting online — so where do you draw the line when you post? And when someone else seems to cross a line, should you intervene, and if so, how? (CP)

(iii) Questions which are posed by the writer to the readers to think about them as part of the solutions given. Unlike the second type of questions, these questions are left to the reader to answer and decide on which options to take. These types of questions are named 'introspective questions' as suggested by Decapua and Dunham (2007, p. 333). According to them, questions such as these encourage the advice-seeker to reflect upon their situations or alternatives to come up with suitable solutions to their problems; hence, readers have to consider their priorities and the implications of different choices that they make. Therefore, there is an assertion of individual choice as it seems that the writer guides and encourages readers to adopt what they find right for them. It is noted that, such questions always follow phrases such as *'ask yourself'*, *'think about'* and *'what if'*, as shown in the following example:
You have to ask yourself: can you deal with whatever answers you find? If you stay with him after finding out he's cheated, will you still be happy? (HW)

The findings show that the use of questions is found in all three contexts but it is most commonly found in the US data, especially the use of anticipated questions and introspective questions.

INTIMATE INTERACTION WITH THE READER

In this form, the writer creates an interactive style of conversation with the implied reader by using the following: (i) interactive discourse items, and (ii) implicit dialogism. Table 5 below shows the types and frequencies of intimate interactions with readers that are used as a persuasive advice strategy in these women's magazines.

TABLE 5. Types and frequencies of intimate interactions with readers as a persuasive advice strategy

Strategy/intimate interaction with the reader	**Number of Occurrences**			Examples
	US	**Malaysia**	**ME**	
Interactive discourse items	13	14	12	*You see, Samantha knows a thing or two about almost losing the love of your life* (AH) *Well, of course she wasn't available…* (CP) *…if the roles were reversed, it would work the same way too, right?* (F)
Implicit dialogism	10	2	9	*So you admit that being single can be lonely…and are informed that you reek of desperation!* (CP) *Yes, it's impossible to know what happens between two people who are in a relationship* (AH) *No, feeling hurt does not make you evil* (CP) *Sure, there are wimps who can't deal with a woman who can fix a leaky faucet or buy her own house* (CP)

These are discussed in detail below:

(i) Interactive discourse items: It is found that the writers sometimes use words that imply face-to-face communication in order to grab the reader's attention and to try and interact as a friend with the implied readers as if there is a direct conversation or interaction going on. The interactive discourse items include 'you know', 'you see', 'well' and question tags (see e.g. Biber et al., 1999; Leech & Svartvik, 1994; Quirk et al. 1985). The interactive discourse items that appear in the texts include *'you see'*, *'well'*, *'wait a minute'*, *'right?'* and the question tags *'wouldn't it?'* and *'isn't it?'*. These interactive discourse items help to create a sense of intimacy and reciprocity between the adviser and the advisee. That is, interactive discourse items such as *'you know'* and *'you see'* are used to express the writer's informality and warmth towards the target audience and to claim the reader's agreement or attention, as argued by Povolná (2003). In addition, question tags have an interactive function of eliciting the reader's confirmation or agreement (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 1080-1089). Hence, the writer is seen as acting as a friend of the reader.

(ii) Implicit dialogism: Some expressions in the texts are read as reactive components of an interaction; these expressions may be read as the writers' responses to readers' implicit questions or comments (Stoll, 1998, p. 555). He states that writers use implicit dialogism as a means to assume their intended readers' beliefs and needs (ibid, 550). Hence, by making use of such expressions, the writers of the texts studied are viewed as adopting a facilitator role since these devices construct a particular kind of readership which is suited to the reactive in the advice articles. These include utterances such as *'So', 'Yes', 'No'* and *'Sure'*, as in the following example:
"So you admit that being single can be lonely…and are informed that you reek of desperation!" (CP)

INTIMATE EXPRESSIONS

The findings of the study also reveal that the writers use intimate expressions or vocabulary as a strategy to interact as a friend with their readers. This helps to construct as illusion of friendliness, familiarity, informality, intimate and personal verbal interaction (Fairclough, 1995), and a more important ideological consequence, according to Fowler (1991, p. 57) is to naturalise the terms in which reality is represented. These intimate expressions include (i) a sense of humour (ii) use of informal language, (iii) intimate sexual words (Erjavec, 2006), (iv) metaphorical expressions (Erjavec, 2006), and (v) over-lexicalisation of sexual words or phrases (Erjavec, 2006). Table 6 below shows the types and frequencies of intimate expressions that are used as a persuasive advice strategy in these women's magazines.

TABLE 6. Types and frequencies of intimate expressions as a persuasive advice strategy

Strategy/intimate expressions	Number of Occurrences			Examples
	US	Malaysia	ME	
A sense of humour	8	7	12	"7 Signs He'll Always Stink!" (WW): *"Did he just fart? ... Did my senses deceive me? Nose, have you gone mad?"*
Use of informal language	144	50	65	*'Sexting'*, *'slutty'* (CP), *'flexting'*, *'dude-friends'* (MC), *'his package'* (F), '*mind-blowing'*, *'hush-hush'* (HW), *'stink'*, *'rock n' roll'*, *'bastard'*, *'shit'*, *'boobs'* (WW), *'bestie'*, *'sucker punch'* (AH)
Intimate sexual words	54	46	9	US data: *'stroking'*, *'sucking'*, *'pump hump'*, *'orgasm'*, *'foreplay'*, *'arousing'*, *'fantasies'*, and *'dirty talk'*.

				Malaysian data: *'nick kisses'*, *'sucking'*, *'nibbling'*, *'light kisses'*, *'wildest fantasies'*, *'kissing'*, and *'foreplay'*.
Metaphorical expressions	29	34	26	*'doing the deed'*, *'the main event'*, *'the opening act'* (CP), *'the main event'* (MC), and *'the bedroom proceedings'*, *'a bedroom romp'*, *'your bedroom romps'*. (F).
Over-lexicalisation of sexual words or phrases	23	39	0	*'spice up your sex life'*, *'sex through fantasy'*, *'sexual imagination'*, *'your sexual lives'*, *'your sexual needs'*, *'enjoy sexual pleasure'* (HW)

These intimate expressions are discussed as follows:

(i). A sense of humour: The writer may sometimes inject a sense of humour in the text in order to entertain the reader. Hence, the writer is seen as both a friend and an entertainer for the reader. For example, "How to Marry a Millionaire" (AH) is a tongue-in-cheek article on "*snaring an A-lister" and* "*fishing for our A-list amore*".

(ii) Use of informal language: The writer sometimes uses non-standard language due to the informal nature of the advice genre in women's magazines and to construct intimacy and closeness with the reader. The informal language found in the texts are mainly lexical items. This usage is most common in the US data, as shown in Table 6.

(iii) Intimate sexual words: By using such words, the writer sets herself as a close friend of the reader who can have a frank discussion about her most private matters. The use of such words is found in many of the US and the Malaysian texts but is found in only one article in the Middle Eastern data. In the first two contexts, the words used are often sexually graphic with many use of slang words such as *'pump hump'* and '*nick kisses'* .On the other hand, in the Middle East the words used to convey sexuality are more formal such as '*clitoral stimulation'*.

(iv) Metaphorical expressions: It is found that there are some words which appear with metaphorical expressions that refer to sexual intercourse, for example, *'doing the deed'* (CP) or *'the main event'* (MC).

(v) Over-lexicalisation of sexual words or phrases: It is noted that in the US and the Malaysian articles, there is a repetition of words or phrases indicating sexual matters throughout the text. The repetition of intimate sexual words, namely, 'over-lexicalization', which is defined as *"the availability of many words for one concept, and indicates the prominence of the concept in a community's beliefs and intellectual interests"* (Fowler, 1991, p. 69), or 'over-wording' as used by Fairclough (1992, p. 93), creates an atmosphere of close intimacy between the writer and the reader and reflects the central focus of most of these articles, that is, sexual matters between men and women.

DISCUSSION

From the analysis, it appears that there are two main roles of the writer, in relation to her relationship with the implied reader. These are: (i) the writer positions herself as a friend or an older, wiser sister of the readers and (ii) the writer positions herself as an expert who exerts her authority in the texts. These two roles are achieved through a number of strategies of persuasion as shown in the findings section.

In general, it is revealed that in all three contexts studied, the strategies of persuasion with regard to the role of the writer as a friend are more numerous than those which constitute the writer as an expert. The producers of the texts probably want to minimise the social distance with the reader through implying a more informal and friendly approach rather than an authority-figure approach. This seems to be a central feature of the genre of advice articles in online women's magazines as the writers need to capture the readers' attention through a 'light' reading of these articles as readers have the option to scan other online articles. Table 7 below shows the strategies of persuasion used in the texts analysed, which help to construct the relationship between the writer and the implied reader, whether as a friend or as an expert:

TABLE 7. The strategies used to identify the relationship between the writer and the implied reader

Friend role	Expert role
• The pronoun 'you'/ 'your'. • The inclusive 'we' • Exclusive 'we' (intermediary) • Questions • Intimate interaction with the reader (i) Interactive discourse items, (ii) Implicit dialogism • Intimate expressions or vocabulary (i) A sense of humour (ii) Use of informal language (iii) Intimate sexual words (iv) Metaphorical expressions (v) Over-lexicalisation of sexual words or phrases • Modality that associate with possibilities and abilities. • Mitigated imperatives	• The exclusive 'we' • Direct imperatives • Modality (deontic modality which construct the relational meaning of obligation)

In relation to the writer's role as a friend, the use of the second person singular pronoun 'you'/'your' is used frequently in all three contexts as the writer of advice columns in women's magazines is often found to position herself as a person who cares about her presumably younger and less knowledgeable sister and the problems she may face. This finding is supported by Fairclough's (1989) 'synthetic personalization' and Talbot's (1995) 'synthetic sisterhood' theories that point out that the second pronoun 'you' indicates a simulated friendship between the writer and reader, in which both parties would be on equal relationship. Machin and Thornborrow (2003, p. 462) also view the pronoun 'you' as generally positioning the reader as a naive receiver of instruction and less than knowledgeable about some of the most basic aspects of sex and relationships; yet it constructs the reader as having agency and being sexually active.

In our findings, we found that the majority of examples of the inclusive 'we' are found in the Middle Eastern data. This is rather surprising because as stated by Fairclough (2001) the use of this form is often associated with elements of democracy and equality, ideas which are generally regarded as not synonymous with this particular context. However, this can be explained by the fact that most of the texts in this particular context are in the form of narratives which are reminiscent of story-telling practises of women gathering together to discuss 'women's issues'. As stated by Fowler and Kress (1979), and Talbot (1992, 1995), the use of the inclusive 'we' calls for involvement, solidarity and intimacy. It constructs the producer of texts and the readers as a united homogenous group, who is sharing situations and constituting identification relations. Hence, we argue that the inclusive 'we' can be included with the second person singular pronoun 'you' to establish the notions of 'synthetic

sisterhood' and 'synthetic personalization' as proclaimed by Fairclough (1989) and Talbot (1995) earlier. The fact that all the writers of the Middle Eastern articles are women also exclude the possibility of any articles in this context falling under the exclusive 'we' representing other social groups, that is, men, category. Although the majority of the articles in the Malaysian and US articles are also written by women, they, nevertheless, are found to occasionally engage with men, either experts or lay-persons, to solicit their advice and opinions. This is not the case in the Middle East as perhaps the fact that mainstream Middle Eastern society is to a large extent still a segregated society dismisses the possibility of men giving advice to women on intimate matters.

In relation to this, we also found that intimate sexual words are found more often in the US and the Malaysian data than those in the Middle Eastern, as the examples found in this particular context are cited from one article only, which is, "Tips for a Pleasant First Time…" (WW). This happens because topics which relate to overt discussions of sexuality continue to be a taboo subject across the Arab world and is often not reported by the media (Mahadeen, 2012). In the aforementioned article, which is an account of tips for losing one's virginity while having sex for the first time, the article is framed with an educational purpose to reassure women about what to expect on their wedding night rather than providing new exciting sex skills as commonly found in the Malaysian and the US data. The few examples of intimate sexual words in the Middle Eastern data also reflect the rather straight-laced attitude of the writers, for example, the use of the rather clinical term *'clitoral stimulation'* as compared to more sexually graphic terms as in the US and Malaysian articles.

Another interesting finding is the frequent use of non-standard words and phrases in all three contexts including in the Middle Eastern and the Malaysian data. The use of informal language in these two contexts reflects the fact that that although these magazines are home-grown publications, they often subscribe heavily to Western dominant terms of references, especially pertaining to popular culture. This could also be a reflection of the globalisation of popular culture which is mainly dominated by Western terms (Wang, 2008). For example, in the headline "How to Avoid Getting Clooney-ed" (AH), the writer uses the name of the Hollywood actor George Clooney as a verb to reflect a particular situation. However, as reiterated earlier, the use of slang words in the Middle East are never sexually explicit terms and phrases as is often found in the US and to a lesser extent in Malaysia, as shown in Table 6.

In our findings, we also found that the majority of examples of the use of questions are found in the US data. As stated earlier the use of questions, especially introspective questions, is often associated with an assertion of individual choice as the reader is encouraged to choose a solution that suits her best. Thus, it is, perhaps, not surprising that they are a common feature in advice articles in the US magazines. However, there are also some examples of introspective questions in the two non-Western contexts. For example, in the article, Marital porn_ Is Watching Porn the Real Deal Breaker? (WW), which is about the dilemma faced by women when they discover their husbands are secretly watching porn, the writer does not offer a solution but rather she leaves it up to the reader to decide when she states *"So ask yourself this, if the roles were reversed and it was you hiding out in the bathroom in the middle of the night – would you expect him to leave you?"*. In another example in the Malaysian article, the anticipated question, *"Do casual relationships necessarily end up in heartache for women?"* Juicy Read: "It's Just Casual Sex…" (F), the answer to this question is provided by two women, who appear to be non-Muslims judging by their names. The two women quoted gave opposing views to the question which the reader is then supposed to decipher as to what the answer should be. Thus, it seems that the same strategy is used with different intended outcomes, depending on the context. In the non-Western contexts, it appears that questions are utilised in these articles to indirectly present

possible solutions to some potentially controversial topics, as demonstrated in the examples above, rather than to reassert individual choice. Implicit solutions offered through the use of questions is seen as a way for the writer to observe cultural sensitivities and avoid any possible confrontation with mainstream societal norms. We also found that the Middle Eastern data used more humorous references than the US and the Malaysian data. Al-Hamid (2003) and Khouri (2007) state that the Middle Eastern landscape provides a 'fertile ground for the use of humour' in society. Humour can, perhaps, also be seen as a way to 'lighten' the tone when discussing issues with potentially serious implications in the society, as outlined above.

In relation to the writer's role as an expert, the exclusive 'we' representing an expert or authority is found mostly in the Middle Eastern data but it is also found to a lesser extent in the other two contexts. However, our findings show that the 'expert' advice is not necessarily a top-down approach only between the writer as an expert, on one hand, and the reader, as the passive recipient of the advice, on the other. This finding is supported by Talbot (1995, p.156), who states that the anonymous group voice, represented by the exclusive pronoun 'we', represents the writer and her colleagues who set themselves up as experts who are engaging with 'friendly gossip' among themselves in an attempt to conjure advice for the readers. We also found that the writers of advice articles in women's magazines in all three contexts are often seen in a 'balancing act' as they set themselves up as experts through the use of imperatives and modality yet they are also careful to construct themselves as a friend of the implied readers through the use of mitigated forms of imperatives such as '*try*' and '*remember*' or modals that denote medium strength modality such as '*can', 'could'*, and '*should*' or using more positive form of modality and imperative than the negative ones. The writers appear to constantly strive to reduce the threat to the self-image of the readers who receive such advice, by giving an appearance of helping them rather than 'ordering' them on what to do. Our findings also match Temmerman's (2014) finding who finds that the imperatives used in women's magazines cannot be interpreted as orders to women but rather as instructions, suggestions, invitations and advice. Thus, the two roles of the writers, that is, as a friend and an expert, are emphasised.

Overall, our findings show that there are some clear differences in the strategies of persuasion used in the different contexts as well as how the reader is positioned, which we believe is attributed to the differences in the cultural norms and values of the respective societies, as discussed above. However, we found that non-cultural factors also account for a few differences observed. The Malaysian data, for example, use fewer questions and more imperatives as they mainly have the structure of a bullet point format. Hence, there is less space for introspective questions while the bullet point format result in sentences that are shorter and more direct than those in the US and the Middle Eastern data. This naturally leads to more use of imperatives in the Malaysian articles. Thus, there also appears to be a relationship between the structure of the advice text and the persuasive strategies used. Nevertheless, we maintain that based on our findings, culture plays the most instrumental role in how these advice texts are constructed.

CONCLUSION

Although the advice columns in women's magazines are sometimes dismissed by society as trivial and unworthy of serious attention as they are often perceived as engaging in mere 'girl talk', offering nothing more than a casual discussion of issues, the findings of our study above highlight that the way they are crafted and construed by the writers are anything but frivolous. The strategies used to influence and persuade the reader to consider their advice without alienating her while at the same time avoiding possible miscalculations on how their

advice will be perceived by society at large, as in the case of the non-Western magazines, show not a small degree of creativity and ingenuity on the part of the writers of these articles.

Unlike relationship advice articles in the past which often follow a Q & A format in the mould of the classic 'Dear Abby' style, magazines nowadays tend to present feature type articles on relationship matters. The writers of such articles choose topics or issues that they think their readers are interested in or need help with and in keeping with contemporary ideals on equality and democracy, their advice has to be construed in a way that is seen as convincing but not condescending to their readers. Thus, it is unsurprising that our findings show that the persuasive strategies related to the writer as a 'friend' are far more numerous than the 'expert' role. The essence of this finding is similarly echoed by the other studies cited in this paper. For example, even when imperatives are used as a persuasive strategy, they will be accompanied by hedging and mitigating devices to lessen the authoritative tone. The persuasive strategies used by these magazines are perhaps related to what we perceive is the general aim of the articles in all three contexts, that is, to provide advice to women while acknowledging their own agency in finding solutions to their concerns.

As the publishing world faces increasing competition from other media platforms, women's magazines are expected to not just attract the attention of the readers but to entertain and persuade them to accept the advice given. Thus, they are expected to perform multifarious roles in order to survive and stay relevant as women now have other sources to obtain relationship advice apart from women's magazines such as online discussion groups. Future research should perhaps be conducted on how relationship advice is dispensed on other media platforms as well as in publications in other languages apart from English and in non-Western contexts.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Reem Adib Lulu has a Ph.D in Applied Linguistics from Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD). She received her MA in Linguistics from the University of Malaya, Malaysia. Her areas of interest include language and gender studies, translation studies (Arabic and English) and media and discourse studies.

Sharifah Nurul Huda Alkaff (Ph.D) is a Senior Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences at Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD). She teaches linguistics and communication modules in the English Studies Programme. Her research interests include media discourse analysis and investigating issues revolving around language, gender and the media. She has published in a number of international journals in these areas.

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