‘Asian Woman’ Magazine: A Discourse Analysis on the construction of ‘Race’ and ‘Gender’

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Abstract

This study is a discourse analysis of ‘Asian Woman’ magazine, specifically examining how ‘race’ and ‘gender’ are constructed within the publication. The study employs a combination of methods which are thematic and narrative analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2006), semiotics as described by Williamson (1978) and a focus group to confirm the analysis of the text carried out by the independent researcher. The study is conducted with an awareness of the intersectionality and subjectivity of the researcher as an Asian woman. The study revealed that ‘gender’ was constructed through an emphasis on appearance and (Hetero) sexuality giving a narrow hegemonic form of femininity, with the ‘racial’ construction of Asian women achieved through a cultural hybridization of Eastern and Western influences resulting in the ‘Eurasian’ woman. This highlights the colonial ideologies that drive the social construct of the ‘Eurasian’ woman apparent in the magazine. Analysis also indicated that the magazine is not aimed at Muslim women due to the negative way the Islamic faith is framed within the publication. Further studies would include an analysis of the focus group dynamics as well as a comparison of ‘Asian Woman’ with a peer publication such as ‘Cosmopolitan’.

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Introduction

This study is a discourse analysis of ‘Asian Woman’ magazine. The magazine has an international readership and is also published in India, Pakistan, Trinidad and Paris. ‘Asian Woman’ has been published in the United Kingdom (UK) for just over ten years, with the first issue sold in 2000. It is a glossy lifestyle journal, similar to publications such as ‘Cosmopolitan’, ‘Marie Claire’, and ‘Red’, all of which are aimed at the female market and also published internationally. The aim of this study is to identify how ‘race’ and ‘gender’ are constructed in a 2009 winter edition of ‘Asian Woman’ published in the UK.

The complex process of this study involves an independent reading of the magazine by the researcher identifying the dominant themes and narratives. There is also a closer examination of a selection of key articles that I consider to be significant. A focus group discussion is utilised to confirm the independent analysis. It should be noted here that it is not in the remit of this study to analyse or provide a full transcript of the focus group material as this technique is employed as a way to confirm and better understand the information I have found to be salient in my analysis. A focus group is used to look for similar ‘readings’ to those found in my initial analysis. This aspect highlights how I use my subjectivity and intersectionality as an Asian woman to explore the discursive, as well as ideological, aspects of the magazine that positivistic research would not be able to achieve.

Literature review

The theoretical basis for this study is a combination of the use of semiotics through discursive psychology and critiques deconstructing lifestyle media that examine the hegemonic gender representations that are prevalent in publications with an international readership.

Discursive psychology

Unlike traditional psychology, Discursive Psychology (DP) does not claim objectivity in its analyses (Potter, 2005). The analytical aim of discursive psychology is to recognise and understand discourses from a hermeneutical standpoint. It focuses on interpretations of individual experiences and how social positions can determine those experiences.

Discourse analysis (DA) has developed from social and discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) within a qualitative framework (Parker et al., 1994). Gilbert & Mulkay (1984) define discourses as any form of spoken language and written texts as well as delineating DA as an appropriate method for analysing these forms. Parker (1992) argues that discourses can be found in any interaction or cultural artefact and describes discourses as a ‘system of statements which constructs the object’ (Parker, 1992; p.5).
The theoretical origins of semiotics can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). He argued that language and meaning should be studied structurally in relation to its various components. Saussure (1916) describes language as a system of ‘signs’ which organises the relationship between the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’. For example the concept of ‘woman’ is the ‘signified’ and the sound of the word ‘woman’ is the ‘signifier’ with the relationship between these two elements giving meaning to the linguistic ‘sign’. This goes on to give meaning to language. Moreover, the relationships between ‘signifiers’ and ‘signifieds’ will possess connotations of power relations. These power relations then go on to affect our understandings of cultures and ideology (Foucault, 1972-1977). Saussure (1916) advocated that the relationship between phonetic word sounds and the object that these words describe as arbitrary. An example of this would be the phonemic sound of the word ‘woman’ bearing no relationship with the concept of ‘woman’ as can be seen by the fact that the word for ‘woman’ is different in different languages. He theorised that isolated words have no inherent meaning by themselves but only in relation to other words. Saussure’s framework has been influential to several theorists in their analysis of language, text and images including Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009), Roland Barthes (1957), and Judith Williamson (1978). This study utilises some of these frameworks to examine power structures and analyse ideology in ‘Asian Woman’ magazine.

Barthes (1957) applied Saussure’s (1916) theory to a mid-nineteenth century style of writing known as *écriture classique*. This writing style, argued Barthes, embodied bourgeois values and politics, thus implicating it as not just a passive description of social practices, but agentic in shaping and forming these practices. Thus in terms of ideology, a style of writing has the power not only to reflect culture but more importantly create culture through its use of particular words and ‘projection of the bourgeois world-view’ (Hawkes, 2003. p. 88). This study identifies ‘Asian Woman’ magazine as a cultural artefact that employs a distinct style of language in order to promote particular perspectives and ideologies.

Williamson (1978) develops a variation of semiotics in her analysis of magazine advertisements from the 1970’s. She uses a form of semiotics to analyse objects, colour, form, text, language, juxtaposition, gender representation, and images of bodies in advertisements. This framework is used in researching what it means to be ‘Asian’ and what it means to be a ‘woman’ in the deconstruction of ‘Asian Woman’ magazine. It forms the foundation for identifying and examining the preferred ‘gender’ and ‘race’ ideologies endorsed by the magazine, helping bring to light any power structures that are embedded within the publication. This study focuses on ideologies and power structures that possess a distinctly colonial influence, the political, social and economic history of the Indian sub-continent as being the largest British colony to have existed (Foreman-Peck, 1989). It is recognised by the researcher that the UK publication of ‘Asian Woman’ magazine is aimed at an Indian sub-continent female market within the UK. This is evident from the focus of material found in the magazine as originating from the Indian sub-continent with a distinctly ‘Bollywood’ flavour.

Deconstructing Lifestyle Journals
Gill (2008) examined representations of women in glossy magazines and identified the place of female agency and empowerment as located in their sexuality, a sexuality that is represented in normative heterosexual forms. This study attended to representations of sexuality in ‘Asian Woman’ magazine, although sexually explicit and controversial representations of sexuality were not expected to appear in a publication that is aimed at the Asian female market as homosexuality is still considered a relatively cultural taboo amongst the Asian community (Chin et al, 2005).

Firminger (2006) looked at magazines aimed at the teenage female market (Seventeen and ELLEgirl). She identified discourses of self-regulation, the male ‘gaze’ as well as physical and mental transformation. Machin and Thornborrows (2003) study of ‘Cosmopolitan’ magazine identified branding as a strong discourse that employed the use of fantasy as an arena to sell products. They argued that the theme of fantasy played a key role in the ‘Cosmo’ brand. The researcher was aware that the theme and discourse of fantasy and the male ‘gaze’ may be present in ‘Asian Woman’ magazine. This is due to the heavily commercialised aspect of the publication.

Frith, Cheng & Shaw’s (2004) cross-cultural study compared images of Asian and Western models in magazine advertisements. They concluded that Asian models were more likely to be used for promoting skin and hair products with Western models more likely to be depicted in seductive dress and pose. Yuval-Davis (2006) discusses the relationships between gender, class, race and ethnicity known as intersectionalities. She states that intersectionalities have bearings on people’s experiences and can be studied at various analytical levels. Cole (2009) examines intersectionality in research conducted within Psychology. She argues that psychologists have shown a reluctance to conduct research focusing on intersectionality as there is a lack of frameworks for the guiding of such research. Research attended to the depiction of models in seductive dress and pose in ‘Asian Woman’. It examined how ‘race’ and ‘gender’ are constructed in ‘Asian Woman’ and to the intersectionality between these concepts. This study is an example of research within Psychology using the subjectivity and intersectionality of the researcher as an Asian woman to guide the research process.

Methodology

A 2009 winter edition of ‘Asian Woman’ UK magazine was analysed for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The categories of themes were not predetermined but allowed to emerge from the reading in order to allow for greater reflexivity. From this it was then possible to identify the narratives and fantasies constructed within the text.

This initial part of the research process was conducted by myself, the independent researcher. It is important to make clear the subjective nature of this reading, as my cultural and social positioning as a Southeast Asian female determines my interpretation of the text which will allow for a greater reflexive analysis. Replication of this study would invariably identify different as well as similar themes, narratives and fantasies depending on the gender, social positioning, and cultural background of the researcher.
A focus group discussion was carried out with four participants (Ps) selected from the student cohort at Manchester Metropolitan University. The aim of utilising a focus group is to provide a separate reading that confirms my independent analysis as well as an insight into themes and issues not realised in my independent reading. This is based on an approach used by Richardson (2007) in her analysis of representations of black females in Hip-Hop music videos.

All participants were female, aged 21-32, of Pakistani descendent and Islamic background. Three of the Participants were second generation, born and raised in the UK, studying on the third year of the Bachelor of Science in Psychology. The fourth was first generation, born in Pakistan and had lived in the UK for the past ten years, studying on an English and Business studies Combined honours degree. These participants were chosen based on the perceived intersectionality they experienced as Asian women as well as their accessibility as cohorts of Manchester Metropolitan University, a dimension that is likely to provide critical debate of the magazine. It is important to highlight that this study is not an analysis of the focus group discussion and therefore no transcription of the discussion will be carried out. The focus group is simply used to identify whether or not they 'read' the same themes and issues into magazine as I do. Therefore, the analysis of this study is partial and subjectively centred around my independent reading.

**Method**

I carried out an independent reading and analysis of a winter 2009 UK edition of ‘Asian Woman’ magazine in order to identify themes and narratives. This analysis and reading of the magazine occurred prior to conducting the focus group discussion.

The focus group discussion took place in a Manchester Metropolitan University building, was audio recorded and lasted for one and a half hours. The questions I asked the group were open ended. I steered the topics of discussion rather than explicitly and directly ask them what themes they could identify. This was because by asking them directly I believed they would only attempt to provide answers which they thought I was seeking (demand characteristics). Furthermore, it would have invited questions from the group about what themes I recognised, which would have influenced their readings. I wanted to see if their readings identified similar or divergent themes, narratives and issues.

**Analysis**

This section begins with a personal reading and interpretation of ‘Asian Woman’ UK magazine. I will summarise the magazine, provide an account of a selection of key articles, outline the identification of salient themes and finally describe the key themes and narratives that emerged from the focus group discussion.

‘Asian Woman’ magazine is a collage of articles and advertisements that invite the reader into a world of hegemonic female fantasy. The front cover (figure. 1) is a bold
and striking depiction of a well known Bollywood actress dressed in cleavage and leg revealing dress making direct eye contact with reader. This image serves as a direct site of interpolation with cover girl’s eyes at the same level with the readers eyes, this could be considered as an example of the ‘returned gaze’ (Žižek, 1992).

A luxury Rolls Royce car is advertised on the first two pages inside the magazine (figure. 2). The advert invites the reader to participate in a fantasy of a high-class socialite lifestyle comparable to millionaires and rock stars (Williamson, 1978). This advertisement sets the foundations for the narratives and fantasies within the magazine of a feminine, jet-set, high flying professional who fully participates in the modern world. There is a cultural blend of East and West creating a world of modern sophistication alongside traditional ethnicity, resulting in a cultural hybridization (Goon & Craven, 2003). This hybridization is illustrated through the traditional Asian styles of dress, advertisements for Asian catering services, a strong presence of the Bollywood entertainment scene, as well as promotion of culturally specific events such as Melas¹ and Asian wedding exhibitions. There are also advertisements for spiritual gurus to be found towards the back of the magazine, which also strongly lend to the ethnic and cultural paradigms. The Western influences are indentified through Western style flesh revealing clothes (that lack the usual modesty one would normally associate with traditional Asian styles), professional careers, technological advancements of luxury cars and mobile phones. The most salient Western influences are the ideology of consumerism, which appears to represent the ‘freedom’ offered in the West, paralleled with the ‘Eurasian’ light-skinned models (Goon & Craven, 2003).

The most prominent dimension to the magazine is the presence of advertising, specifically the advertising of women’s clothes. There is mixture of traditional Asian dress, such as Saris² and Shalwar kameez’³, alongside modern Western styles and brands. The reader is bombarded with images of dresses, hand bags, shoes, jewellery, make-up and cosmetic products which are being modelled on attractive, young models.

¹ An Asian Mela is a Sanskrit word used to describe a ‘meeting’ or ‘gathering’ which maybe religious, commercial, cultural, or sporting in nature. In the context of the magazine it usually of a commercial nature used to promote consumer products.
² A Sari is a long stretch of cloth that is draped over the body in various styles.
³ A Shalwar Kameez is a three piece outfit consisting of a tunic, shawl and trousers.
Figure 1: ‘Asian Woman’ magazine 2009 Winter edition, front cover.

Figure 2: Rolls Royce advertisement.
It is clear that the overall aim of the magazine is to get their readers to buy products that enhance their appearance and femininity which in turn enhance their appeal to the opposite sex.

**Themes**

A thematic analysis carried out indentified ten categories that dominated the magazine. These are: Appearance; Celebrity and entertainment; Weddings, marriage and interpersonal romantic relationships; Family, parenting and homemaking; Careers, work and money; Health and fitness; Travel and holidaying; (Hetero) Sexuality; Cultural hybridization; Political and social awareness. I will discuss a selection of the main themes.

**Appearance**

The category of appearance dominated the magazine with the majority of the pages referring to appearance maintenance and enhancement in some way. The majority of advertisements were for clothing and cosmetic products, indicating that appearance and the maintenance of appearance is paramount for the ‘Asian Woman’. This appearance is very much of a stereotypical gendered variety giving a very prescribed and restricted definition of femininity whilst dictating desirable female aesthetics. Women are visually depicted as passive and only agentic through their (hetero) sexuality. Although, there are articles describing women’s careers and working lives these occupations tend to be modelling, acting and singing, occupations that traditionally employ the female form in very aesthetic and decorative ways, adding to the patriarchal and misogynistic ideology that the female form is an object to be adorned and treated as visual stimulation for the ‘male gaze’.

**‘Racial’ Appearance & Cultural Hybridization**

The ‘racial’ appearance of the ‘Asian Woman’ is constructed using a blend of Western and Eastern influences, resulting in the ‘Eurasian’ appearance. The ‘Eurasian’ look is the preferred look for female models appearing in the magazine. She has long black or dark hair, a narrow Caucasian style nose (usually achieved through cosmetic surgery), dark eyes, full lips, with a light-skin tone. This Asian woman is a physical as well as material blend of Western and Eastern influences. At points throughout the magazine she is pictured wearing traditional Asian clothes and accessories, symbolising ethnic authenticity. At other times she is pictured in Western clothing and accessories, symbolising modernity and Western (neo) liberation.

The ‘Asian Woman’ is flexible in her ability to adapt to requirements of an occasion or culture, capable of appearing traditionally ethnic or modern and Western when it is appropriate. This ability to shift from traditional to modern or combining both cultural influences is dependent upon the product being promoted and the ideology behind it. For example in the fashion spread entitled ‘Wild at Heart’ (figure. 3), a range of modern Western clothing is modelled by a ‘darker’ skinned female model, appearing to be of Afro-Caribbean descent. The article employs a narrative of an adventurous and daring
woman with a sinful character. This is clear in the use of fire and dark lighting in the images. Inversely, a juxtaposed fashion spread entitled 'Genie in a Bottle' (figure 4) for a range of traditional style Asian outfits is modelled by a lighter-skinned 'Eurasian' female, with a fairytale narrative that references 'Rapunzel' and 'Sleeping beauty'. Through this juxtapositioning an unconscious message is sent out to readers indicating that dark skin is associated with a sinful side of femininity and pale skin associated with purity and innocence. This reading is similar to the findings of Frith, Cheng & Shaw (2004) who indentified a preference of the depiction of Western models in seductive dress and pose, although in ‘Asian Woman’ it is a darker-skinned model depicted within a sinful and seductive narrative.

Weddings, Marriage & Interpersonal Romantic Relationships

Weddings, marriage and interpersonal romantic relationships is a category of themes manifested through many facets throughout the magazine. Out of a total of 195 pages there are twenty-one pages depicting wedding paraphernalia. These include adverts for caterers, venues, bridal wear and wedding exhibitions. This strong emphasis on weddings and marriage could be due to a perceived cultural importance and significance of marriage and weddings in Asian communities. This narrative could also be attributed to the consumer markets targeting of women in general regardless of ‘race' and culture as this narrative can also be seen in many other global glossy magazines aimed at the female market. Here the narrative is based on an ideology of woman as an accessory to man, only becoming a full person once she is attached to a man through a process of tradition, law, ritual and emotional commitment. These themes assume the heterosexuality of the readers and there is no recognition of a spectrum of sexuality, overall giving sexuality a very narrow hegemonic heterosexual definition.

Key Articles

I will now examine three articles in the magazine considered to be particularly significant. These articles openly address the issues of ‘race’, racism in the UK, and Islamic cultural expectations and controversy. These articles are entitled ‘Racist Britain’; ‘Mirror, Mirror On The Wall, Who Says Fair is Best of All’; ‘Stripped’. These articles are organised into a sub-section entitled ‘Asian Woman Real’ within the magazine.

‘Racist Britain’ (figure 5) interpolates the reader by allowing them space to give their experiences and opinions of racism in the Britain today. Opinions are varied with some arguing that racism affects many aspects of social and professional life, with others claiming to have never experienced racism. The article opens by outlining a BBC documentary investigating racial abuse experienced by two undercover British Muslim
Figure 3: ‘Wild At Heart’ fashion spread.

Figure 4: ‘Genie in a Bottle’ fashion spread
Figure 5: ‘Racist Britain’ article.

Figure 6: ‘Mirror Mirror on the wall, who says fair is best of all’ article.
reporters posing as a couple in Bristol in light of a debate with the British National Party leader Nick Griffin on BBC’s ‘Question Time’. It acts to broaden readers’ political and social awareness by discussing what can still be considered a taboo and controversial subject. The article has a very urban flavour to it using illustrations of brick walls as a backdrop to the text. This may unconsciously suggest that most readers may live in an inner city or urban area, or that racism is a problem mainly experienced in cities and urban settings.

In the article ‘Mirror, Mirror on The Wall, Who Says Fair is Best of All?’ (figure 6) skin colour and techniques employed to achieve a lighter skin colour amongst women in the Asian community is discussed. The article discusses the prejudice in Asian communities towards those with darker skin colouring as well as the equation of fairness with beauty.

“In Asian communities fair skin is held up as an ideal, and associated with a superiority and worthiness that is not afforded by those of a darker complexion”

(Wimal, 2009. ‘Asian Woman’ magazine p. 65)

The article asks an expert’s opinion and traces the sub-continents origins for the preference for light-skin, attributing this prejudice to ancient times arguing that people wished to mirror the physical attributes of the dominant groups. For the sub-continent these were the higher Indian castes of Brahmmins and Kshatriyas, who had lighter skin than the lower castes. Out of a six page feature there are six lines discussing colonialism’s influence on the desire for white skin, a minimal amount considering the colonial history of the sub-continent.

The article discusses Bollywood’s exclusion of darker skinned actors and the inverse tendency of Hollywood’s preference for darker skinned Asian actors due to their exotic appeal. The high regard for lighter skinned brides in the arena of marriage is also examined. The article also discusses the cosmetic industry’s cashing on this prejudice through its manufacture of toxic and illegal skin lightening creams containing the lethal chemical hydroquinone. Illustrations used include a photograph of a light-skinned ‘Asian bride’ dressed in a traditional European white bridal gown. This is an example of cultural hybridization, the adornment of an Asian female with European bridal wear. Sub-continent brides traditionally wear a range of various colours but red is a particularly favoured colour.

The article works toward dispelling myths surrounding skin tones and argues for equality amongst the Asian communities. It also recognises that this prejudice is commonly held within Asian communities and not necessarily amongst the white community. This indicates that skin tone prejudice is an aspect of social hierarchy amongst the Asian community, illustrating the inner politics of ‘race’ within that particular demographic as well as suggesting ‘racism’ to be as much about the dynamics of how ethnic and cultural groups view themselves rather than how they are treated by those considered to be outside of their ethnic and cultural group.

Although this article seems to consciously work towards breaking down prejudices by raising readers’ political and social awareness, it seems contradictory in comparison to
the light-skinned ‘Eurasian’ models used for most of the magazine’s advertising and features on women’s fashions. Moreover, several pages later in the magazine there is an advertisement for an anti-tanning gel (figure 7). This product is specifically designed for use on ‘Asian and darker skin’.

The article entitled ‘Stripped’ (figure 8) written by British Asian actress, singer and model Sofia Hayat, is an account of a publicity stunt she carried out to promote the charity Ashiana who help women victims of forced marriages, domestic violence and honour killings. The publicity stunt involved Hayat arriving at a film premiere in the UK dressed in a burqa⁴ and stripping down to reveal bondage gear in front of the crowds. The article features two photographs of Hayat, a head shot of her in a hijab and a provocative one of her in a swimming pool, sporting an almost transparent white dress. These photographs have been used to illustrate the two sides of Hayat that were employed in the film premiere stunt. The photograph of Hayat in the bondage gear is not featured. Instead at the end of the article readers are directed to the ‘Asian Woman’ website where they may view the photograph. The refusal of the magazine to publish the actual photograph they are directly referring to seems somewhat ironic as they have decided to feature a full page spread on Hayat’s socio-political opinion on the oppression faced by many women in the Islamic culture and her subversion of the burqa and hijab which have become politically charged symbols of Islamic womanhood, culture, religion and controversy.

Focus Group Discussion

The discussion was free flowing, using open ended questions as the intention was not to explicitly ask participants if they recognised the themes identified through my independent reading but to see if these themes were particularly salient to them in their readings. This was considered to be the most appropriate approach as direct questions referring to the themes identified in my independent analysis would have influenced their answers in such a way that it would have made the discussion an exercise in imposing my own interpretation upon their reading. Instead the rationale in the utilisation of the focus group was a way of confirming my interpretation of the magazine as well as to bring to light any issues, themes and narratives I had not identified.

Themes

Eight out of the ten categories of themes were identified in the group discussion. The themes not recognised by the group were travel and holidaying; Family, parenting and homemaking. I will discuss the salient themes discussed by the group.

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⁴ Full Islamic gown including the hijab (head scarf) and face veil, worn to prevent the female form being seen in public.
Appearance

Appearance was a strong recurrent theme in the discussion. The participants recognised that appearance dominated the magazine through various facets like fashion, body image and size, skin-tone, glamour and designer dresses. This indicates how fluently the magazine has used appearance as a means of interpolation as all members of the group mentioned it as a particularly striking aspect of the publication. One participant noticed the advertisement for anti-tanning gel, which opened the discussion and the group talked about the cover models skin-tone, saying it was much darker than how it was depicted in the magazine. This suggests that it had been digitally altered.

Weddings, Marriage & Interpersonal Romantic Relationships

The theme of weddings, marriage and interpersonal romantic relationships was considered to be a strong site of interpolation by the group. They discussed how marriage is a salient aspect and how it is considered to be the main 'goal' in life for Asian women. They discussed how the advertisements for dating websites and services were included in the magazine as an alternative to the traditional route of
arranged marriages. One participant considered them to be ‘...a platform to launch
themselves into the Western world’ which symbolises a strong area of cultural
hybridization with the Asian emphasis on marriage and traditional domestic settings
alongside the Western concept of dating services.

**Cultural Hybridization**

Cultural hybridization was distinctively recognised by the group through the many
references to the mix of Eastern and Western symbols in the magazine. One
participant explicitly stated that the magazine was directed at Western Asian women
which she saw as a ‘new identity’. The group agreed that the magazine was directed at
young South Asian women aged twenty to thirty-five; either at college, university or
already in a professional career; not yet married, but aspiring towards marriage.
However, one of the participants did not think it was marketed at Islamic women as she
was not able to find many representations of Muslim females.

**Key Articles**

Political and social awareness was strongly identified by the group, especially when
discussing the selected articles which I will now discuss.

The group felt that the presence of the article ‘Racist Britain’ served to raise the political
and social awareness of the magazine’s readership, that it allowed readers to become
aware of the racist experiences that many other Asians have had with which they could
relate to. P3 suggested that the article served to highlight how Asians themselves could
be racist towards non-Asians, an issue she thought was pertinent within Asian
communities. This interpretation is significant because racism is not something that is
necessarily attributed as being projected from minority groups, rather it is usually
considered to be perpetrated by dominant groups and experienced by minority groups.

P4 recognised the contradictory nature of the picture used in the ‘Mirror, Mirror, on The
Wall, Who Says Fair is Best of All?’ article, which depicts a famous Bollywood actress
next to a mirror through which her skin-tone appears lighter (see figure 6). She argued
that the image of the actress in the mirror was more flattering as she was wearing a
pink coloured dress and pink coloured lipstick which she felt did not complement her
skin-tone. However, in the mirror image these colours were flattering due to the lightening
of her skin-tone. P4 found this depiction to be confusing and contradictory to the
apparent message of the article. In my own analysis I had noticed the lightening of the
skin in the mirror image but had failed to see how the outfit and make-up was
uncomplimentary for her complexion.

There was discussion circling around opinions and prejudices in the Asian community
regarding skin-tone. The group members felt the presence of this article served to
increase social and political awareness. There was also recognition of the social
mobility afforded by those with fair skin, for example the prospect of a husband with
greater social ranking.
They felt that the ‘Stripped’ article painted a very biased picture of Islamic beliefs as being oppressive and coercive towards women. However, they also acknowledged the ways in which the article served as tool for encouraging oppressed Muslim women to seek emancipation, and P2 felt that this kind of radical act maybe needed to raise awareness female agency in a culture that could possibly be experienced as oppressive for some women. Although, they did not notice that the picture of Hayat in bondage gear was not published.

**Reflexive Analysis**

The process of my independent analysis was a solitary pursuit as it is about my subjective reading of the material. My Analysis is framed by my intersectionality as an Asian female which influenced the themes I am conscious of within the magazine. However, I am a South East Asian female and feel unable to fully enter the symbolic register of the magazine. Although I relate to the literal meaning of the word ‘Asia’ as a continent, I was not able to fully interpolate myself with the material presented.

The narrative of the ‘Asian Woman’ is that of someone possessing the authentic ethnic roots of the Sub-continent whilst also embodying the superficial and artificial cosmetic ‘whiteness’ imposed upon them by a colonial hangover. The power of colonial rule is still globally present and affects the ways in which people ascribe to aesthetic notions of beauty, this is particularly so for women as they are treated as aesthetic objects in media representations. Although my country of origin, Laos, has never been a British colony, I am not exempt from the ideological effects of white colonial superiority.

In methodological terms the independent analysis was convenient and allowed me to pursue the research relatively freely. However, at times this aspect was also constraining as towards the end of this process I became stuck in an analytical rut and felt saturated by the material.

Using a focus group enabled me to cross reference my reading of the magazine. It allowed me to recognise any themes and issues I was not conscious of. By using Pakistani women I was able to get an idea of the themes and issues important to them. However, using such a narrow selection of participants also gave me a rather restricted view, and it is likely that I would get a different reading if the group consisted of non-Asian males and females. The focus group discussion itself could be analysed in its own right in terms of group dynamics and social position of individual participants. For example one of the participants was a disabled wheelchair user, which I did not think would impact on the group discussion and reading of the magazine but in retrospect I recognise how this participants’ intersectionality influences her understanding and participation with the symbolic language and imagery employed in the magazine. There was also an unconscious tension concerning group dynamics as disability is a taboo subject within the Asian community, which I was not aware of when I carried out the discussion. At times the opinions of the disabled participant went unheard. This would make interesting material for a further study.

**Discussion**
Both the independent analysis and the focus group discussion identified the importance of appearance within the magazine. The group talked about the fashion spreads and the significance of designer clothing, although they said they liked the images of the designer products, remarking that they were very colourful and visually stimulating. They realised this was part of a fantasy describing an ideal world embodied by the magazine as they also highlighted how these products were not within their personal budgets. This illustrates the significance of fantasy embedded in ‘Asian Woman’. The magazine uses symbols that readers recognise as desirable and reflective of a particularly affluent lifestyle but the focus group simultaneously acknowledged the unrealistic yet appealing fantasy being sold to them. P4 remarked on the narrow hegemonic representation of female bodies commenting that there were ‘no fat girls in it’. Another participant remarked how the Asian models were very similar to white models found in peer publications. This is similar to the findings of previous studies (Gill, 2008; Firminger, 2006; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003).

The images of women provide a very narrowly defined representation of ‘woman’. The images of depict women as passive and valued for their aesthetic qualities. There are an overwhelming number of photographs of women modelling clothes and in these pictures they do not appear to be doing anything in particular but posing for the ‘gaze’ with their expression as usually one of seduction, coyness or of a candid nature where the model is ‘unaware’ she is being photographed. This is polarised with the way men are depicted as confident, dominant and always in direct eye contact with the reader, which demonstrates the ‘returned gaze’ (Žižek, 1992).

The issue of skin lightening was so salient to the group that it was the first topic of discussion which required no prompting. From my own reading of the magazine I had noticed a remarkable preference for lighter skinned ‘Eurasian’ looking models. I believe that many of the images of models had been digitally altered to lighten their skin. This highlights the colonial ideologies that drive the social construct of the ‘Eurasian’ woman apparent in the magazine which has been discussed by Goon & Craven (2003). They argue that ‘whiteness’ has become a marketable commodity and the ‘Eurasian’ look embodies an ‘authentic’ genetic result of migration and globalisation:

“Transnational and transcultural commodifications are producing hybrid notions of ‘colour’, ‘paleness’ and ‘whiteness which are fusing economic, neo-colonial and class-based hierarchies of value. Therefore, in discourses of skin-whitening, we argue, ‘whiteness’ and ‘paleness’ signify both distinction between, and collusion with, the historical myths of paleness associated with feminine discourses of beauty, and ‘whiteness’ as an imperialist, racialised value of superiority”.

(Goon & Craven, 2003)

This is the case with ‘Asian Woman’ magazine as it an international publication that appeals to women descended from a former British colony, the Sub-continent. In terms of the ‘authentic’ nature of ‘Eurasian’ white skin, this can be achieved through an inauthentic artificial process.
Lipsitz (1998) also discusses the commodification of ‘whiteness’ and the ways in which it is forced upon ‘racialised’ groups as a means of white approval. Lipsitz describes how ‘race’ is a cultural construct and here in ‘Asian Woman’ cultural blending has been used to construct the ‘Eurasian’ woman, perhaps to make her fantasy more desirable to readers. The ‘Eurasian’ woman depicted in the magazine can be seen to symbolise the freedoms and privileges seemingly afforded by modern Asian women.

The theme of cultural hybridization was strongly recognised within the group and the independent reading. The group described the audience as modern second generation Asian women who wanted to assimilate into the western culture. This was a new identity that offered Asian women new opportunities for education, professional careers and empowerment of sexual identity. This new identity has been created through the ‘racial’ construction of the ‘Eurasian’ woman by using symbols signifying Asian ethnicity and Western beauty and desire. This combination provides a narrative of Asian women as ethnically authentic with ‘white’ skin considered to be aesthetically pleasing within a colonially influenced discourse. The ‘whitening’ of Asian women highlights the interpretation of a colonial discourse by those who experience the intersectionality of ‘race’ and ‘gender’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006)

It is rare to find articles openly discussing racism in commercial genderised publications. I have not come across such articles in other global publications aimed at women such as ‘Cosmopolitan’, ‘Marie Claire’ and ‘Red’, all lifestyle journals that I would place in the same category as ‘Asian Woman’. The magazine demonstrates its ability to discuss issues relevant to their readers who identify with the intersectionality of ‘race’ and ‘gender’.

The narrative of Muslim women depicted in the magazine is that of extreme oppression, the fight for freedom demonstrated by Asian women in the public eye on behalf of their oppressed sisters, and the need for controversial action in the raising of peoples social and political awareness. The photograph in the ‘Stripped’ article is the only illustration of Muslim women in the magazine. This highlights the way in which ‘Asian Woman’ has decided to frame the cultural symbols of the hijab and burqa in a negative as well as controversial way, suggesting that ‘Asian Woman’ is not aimed at Muslim women but more likely to be directed at a Hindu Indian female market. It also indicates that the readership may feel emancipated compared to their Islamic counterparts.

The burqa and hijab as symbols of Islamic faith and culture have become highly sensitive subjects since the depiction of ‘Islamic violence’ in the media’s coverage of the destruction of the World Trade Centre and the supposed ‘war on terror’. Former home secretary Jack Straw also heightened debate and socio-political tension surrounding the symbolism of the hijab and burqa by revealing that he would ask Islamic women if they wished to remove the head scarf during consultations in his surgery. Prior to these incidents it seemed that traditional Islamic dress was never considered controversial or oppressive by the media but more as a symbol of their faith and culture.

The information learned from this study indicates that mass media publishing has recognised a niche market for a demographic of female consumers descended from
the Sub-Continent. From the analytical process it is possible to identify how Asian women are represented in the magazine. This representation is restricted to a narrow hegemonic genderised form not dissimilar to representations given in other mainstream lifestyle journals aimed at the female market. The 'racial' representation of the Asian women is that of a cultural blend resulting in the 'Eurasian' woman. This demonstrates how mainstream media has manipulated the appearance of Asian women to fit in with a colonialised ideology where white-skin is considered desirable and superior to dark-skin.

In terms of further research, a comparison of 'Asian Woman' with a peer publication such as 'Cosmopolitan' would also be interesting for a further study examining how 'race' and 'gender' are constructed within each publication.

This study has highlighted the significance of intersectionality in psychological research and the ways in which intersectionalities impact on interpretations of a cultural artefact. It has shown that an individual's subjectivity can be salient when conducting discursive psychological research.
References

Asian Interactive Media (2009) *Asian Woman*, issue No. 42


