

# Images and Representations of Menopause in a Malaysian Woman Magazine: An Analysis of MIDI

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## Abstract

Magazine is one of the main sources of information on health-related issues, including menopause. Due to its format and writing style, a magazine can be regarded as an easy reading. Considered to be a taboo or non-spoken topic in some societies, menopause does not receive similar amount of coverage by the magazines as compared to business, education, beauty and fashion. In other words, it is regarded as less important women issues. The study aims to analyse the images or representations of menopause in a woman magazine. Compared to other studies on the portrayals of women and women-related issues in the mass media, this study only focuses on depictions of menopause in MIDI. The magazine is a fortnightly Malay language publication specifically targeted at female readers aged forty and above. The data for this study were gathered for several months in years 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009. The articles from MIDI were analysed using thematic analysis, focusing on the concepts or expressions or phrases used by the magazine to depict the concept of menopause. The findings of the study highlighted some of the common images and representations of menopause in MIDI.

**Keywords:** menopause, representations, health, women, woman magazine

## 1. Introduction

Mass media are considered by many researchers and scholars to be one of the important tools for disseminating any kind of information, including health-related information (Elliott, 1994; Bomlitz & Brezis, 2008; Wakefield, Loken, & Hornik, 2010; Diah, 2010). For instance, Bomlitz and Brezis (2008) studied the mass media coverage of health hazards and risks, and they found that there were many misrepresentations. Compared to the existing studies, the present study examined the representations of menopause in a Malaysian woman magazine.

### 1.1 Mass Media and Health-related Information

One of the roles of the mass media is to disseminate information to the public (Dominick, 2013; Romano, 2005). Other than giving information, the mass media also provide interpretations of certain issues or events to the audience (Dominick, 2013) and more often than not, the interpretations are much influenced by the goals of the mass media organisations. In other words, how the information framed depends on the interests and objectives of the organisations. In the context of health-related information, the types and amount of information depend on a question of whether or not the information would be able to attract more audience to subscribe to the publications.

There are many writings as well as studies conducted on how the mass media covered or reported health-related information (Elliott, 1994; Wall, 1997; Whiteman, Cui, Flaws, Langenberg, & Bush, 2001; Vainionpää & Topo, 2006; Gupta & Sinha, 2010; Ahmed & Bates, 2013). Gupta and Sinha (2010) content analysed the print media (newspapers and magazines) and electronic media (television and radio) and they found that the mass media did not give a significant coverage on health issues as compared to politics, sports, crime, and social matters. In relation to the manner of the media coverage on treatment (Hormone Replacement Therapy) and chronic illness (breast cancer), Whiteman et al. (2001, p. 575) concluded that the media provided “a distorted view” of results

scientific research by “overemphasizing positive studies” and only referring to “a fraction of the body of research”. In other words, the media failed to present the audience with the whole picture of the result. Bomlitz and Brezis (2008) found that the mass media misrepresented emerging and chronic health risks. Despite the above-mentioned flaws, the mass media are seen as the best tool to disseminate health-related information considering its ability to reach a large audience.

### 1.2 Mass Media and Menopause

Among the kinds of health-related issues dealt with by the media are HIV/AIDS, various cancer diseases, obesity, diabetes and heart attack (Whiteman et al., 2001; Bomlitz & Brezis, 2008). In general, the media reports on the symptoms and treatment of the diseases as well as preventative measures that need to be taken into consideration by the public. However, menopause is a ‘relatively minor topic of interest to the media’ (Gannon & Stevens 1998, p.10) compared to issues like cancer, HIV/AIDS and heart disease. Gannon and Stevens (1998) noted that the media primarily disseminate information about menopause based on the biomedical paradigm in which menopausal women are seen as declining in their condition and in need of a drug to fix the problem. Gannon and Stevens’ study, which is set in America, reflects the practice in Malaysia where the media also rely on the medical model to explain the issue to women and society at large. Media presentations of issues related to the menopause in Malaysia are to some degree unhelpful and do not portray menopause in a positive light.

The media, to some degree, must be seen as responsible for creating a climate of pressure upon urban Malay women to look good and feel good about their bodies (Diah, 2010). The reason why women rely on magazines and newspapers for information about menopause, they said that some doctors spent very little time during appointments and there were times when the doctor had many patients and they had to consider others who were waiting. They did not have the confidence to ask the doctor questions about their condition or to seek further information from them. These sources inform their perceptions and understandings and confirm or deny their own personal experience of menopause. They lead them to adopt positive or negative ways of thinking about menopause and ageing in general. Through the study of communication we see that the way in which the news is transmitted to the public and the frame through which the news is presented, is a choice made by journalists (Vainionpää & Topo, 2006). In other words, media draws public attention to certain topics through their reporters who select the topics.

According to Goffman (1974), mass media have a role in framing issues either to be seen as something positive or negative. Framing leads others to accept a particular issue over the other. It is a process by which an individual or the society perceives a particular issue as a political, security, medical or public controversy. For Entman (1993, p. 52), “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation”.

Indeed, frames influence the perception of the audience about the issues presented. This process is a form of agenda-setting; it not only tells us what to think about, but also how to think about the issue. Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) used four types of framing to examine how issues can be framed in ways to make them more appealing and outstanding (refer to Table 1). This study argues that the framing is not always positive; it is in fact quite ambiguous and there are conflicting meanings presented to the women who use the media as a principal source of information.

Table 1. Framing tools (adopted from Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996, p. 101) used to present menopause in either positive or negative ways in various media

Framing	Purpose	Example
Metaphor	To offer a new meaning by comparing it to something else	Menopause is entering the <i>golden years</i> or the <i>twilight</i> of your life. (positive and negative)
Stories	To frame a subject by selecting stories that can attract attention and be remembered by people	One woman who swears by HRT is Ruby. She turned to HRT and claimed it helps her to live life to the fullest. (positive) HRT links to cancer researchers say. (negative)
Slogans and catchphrases	To frame a subject through unforgettable and familiar expressions	HRT - a pill a day will keep your troubling symptoms away. (positive)
Contrast	To describe a subject in terms of what it is not	Some women take herbal remedies but there is no guarantee it helps prevent osteoporosis.

By using stories of women who have taken HRT and combining catchy slogans produced by pharmaceutical companies a particular frame can influence the manner in which women make decisions about using HRT or other remedies for symptoms associated with menopause.

Menopause as a non-spoken topic shrouded in embarrassment can therefore potentially be transformed into a spoken topic by re-framing the issue in terms of a medical problem needing medical intervention. The idea of framing menopause as a biomedical issue by medical scientists and professionals gives some insight into the issue of the power difference between experts and the layperson, as suggested by Foucault (2000). Thus, connecting what is framed as being within the biomedical domain together with other powerful political and economic factors such as the commercial side of drug production, presents HRT as being the answer to the problem. The medical framing of the issue has a striking impact on women's overall thinking about menopause. Doctors attempt to promote HRT by encouraging patients to think about its benefits along particular lines. This is accomplished by highlighting certain benefits of HRT, such as alleviating menopausal symptoms as well as providing protection for their bones and hearts.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Data Analysis and Data Collection

In this study, the researcher selected secondary sources i.e. print magazine. The units of analysis were the articles selected from each of the magazine. A total number of 18 articles on menopause were selected and thematically analysed (Table 2).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). It involves identifying themes inductively from the data (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 192).

In the study, the frequency with which a single theme or sub-theme appeared throughout the data was not a key factor in determining the significance of the theme. As stated by Braun and Clarke (2006), "the 'keyness' (sic) of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures - but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research questions" (p. 82).

Table 2. Number of publications and articles

Year	Issue number	No. of articles on menopause
2006	1. Jan-Feb (Intro. issue)	4
	2. March	2
	3. June	0
	4. August	2
	5. September	0
	6. October	0
	7. November	1
	8. December	0
2007	9. September	1
2008	10. March	0
	11. April	1
	12. July	3
	13. September	0
	14. October	2
	15. November	1
	16. December 1	0
	17. December 15	0
2009	18. April	1
TOTAL		18

This study selected MIDI, a woman Malay magazine, as the source of the data. MIDI, published by Kumpulan Karangraf Sdn Bhd Malaysia, was a lifestyle magazine dedicated specifically at women aged 40 and above (MIDI, 2011). The magazine's slogan was Aspirasi Wanita (Women's Aspiration) and it covered issues such

personal growth, health, female psychology, fashion, and the change that women go through at this stage of their life. The main for the selecting this magazine was its emphasis on giving information to female readers, aged 40 and above. This was also related to the focus of the study i.e., menopause, which is normally, experienced by women above 40 years old (Flint, 1975). Compared to other Malaysian Malay woman magazines, MIDI focused on issues faced by women aged 40 and above or middle-aged women (MIDI, 2011). This study analysed 18 issues of MIDI, focusing mainly articles on menopause or menopause-related issues (refer to Table 2).

### 3. Results

The data analysis indicated that menopause was underreported by MIDI, as compared to other topics such as fashion, beauty, and lifestyles. Considering the number of issues analysed, MIDI only published 18 articles on menopause (refer to Table 2). This is consistent with Gannon and Stevens's (1998) finding where it was stated that menopause is a "relatively minor topic of interest to the media". In other words, menopause was not regarded as a topic which could trigger people's interest to buy the magazine. Thus, there was no difference between MIDI and other woman magazines where the emphasis was on fashion, beauty, and lifestyle.

Some of the information about middle-age and the menopause were reported inconsistently and often in a contradictory manner. For example, it is evident in its first edition in 2006, the headline was 'Sex crisis in the 40s', in 2007 it was 'Reaching 50 with confidence' and in 2008, 'The apprehensions of reaching 40'. These headlines appeal to women who are often confused themselves about their transitional status from younger to more mature woman. In general, the magazines make its headlines or stories more appealing through using catchy phrases and reporting the stories of celebrities. This is also evident in the MIDI magazine where middle-aged celebrities were selected for the front cover of the magazines and their tips about how to maintain youthful looks and femininity were also highlighted throughout the pages of the magazine.

Initially, not much was written about menopause in MIDI's first year of publication in 2006. In that year, a more positive report about menopause, ageing, healthy lifestyle and diet were presented to the reader. On top of that, the emphasis of youth and beauty through fashion, cosmetics and accessories was strongly emphasised. A small fraction of articles in 2006 had negative overtones. MIDI also promoted alternative medicine and *petua orang tua* (old folk practices) to treat menopause. However, the emphasis on these treatments was not the highlight of the magazine. Only between 2007 and 2008 MIDI began to promote a biomedically approved approach to menopause.

Throughout the years, the emphasis on youth and beauty in the magazine has been even stronger and bolder than before. More and more beauty products, fashions and the latest technologies were introduced in the magazine, supposedly to boost women's level of confidence in their middle-age. A more proactive approach to the menopause was also advocated; for example, in MIDI 1 July 2008 edition: *Terapi gantian hormone bantu atasi vagina kering* (HRT helps to overcome dry vagina) was printed on the magazine front page cover. The two pages article, which is based upon an interview with a gynaecologist, supported the need for women to take HRT to overcome their sexual problems, prevent osteoporosis and other menopause-related symptoms. New technologies were also introduced in this magazine like anti-ageing treatment through mesotherapy, Botox, Serdev, collagen, placenta and Vitamin C injections to revitalize ageing skin, associated with menopause and ageing in general.

While women were presented with information through the text (words), images depicting menopausal or middle-aged women also have a significant influence upon women as they enter another phase of their lives. Some images in MIDI were very positively portrayed and interesting. For instance, an article entitled "*Ayuh Wanita menopause, bersikaplah menopositive lah!* (Menopausal women, be menopositive)" urged menopausal women to have a positive thinking mindset and to manage the changes (physical and emotional) effectively (November 2008). In other words, MIDI tried to change the readers' attitude and perspective towards menopause by providing positive representations.

### 4. Discussion

The results of the study indicated that there are different images or representations of menopause portrayed by MIDI. In its early publications, MIDI focused more on the physical appearance than health-related information i.e. menopause. The results indicated that the middle-age and older women felt the pressure to conform to the idealistic standards portrayed through the media. The emphasis on youth and beauty was overwhelmingly noticeable in this magazine.

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