

Pink Power: Femininity and Consumerism in Malaysian Advertising

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.924ILEIID0079>

Received: 23 September 2025; Accepted: 30 September 2025; Published: 01 November 2025

ABSTRACT

Colour in advertising is more than an aesthetic choice; it is a semiotic tool that shapes how audiences perceive products and identities. In Malaysian advertising, particularly beauty and body care campaigns, the colour pink has become increasingly prominent. However, a limited study has investigated the use of pink within multimodal discourse in this context. This study examined recent Malaysian YouTube advertisements that feature predominantly pink visuals. The study utilised Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design and Halliday and Matthiessen's transitivity model to study the advertisements. The findings show that pink does not simply serve as a colour choice, but also a meaningful symbol that links femininity to identity and consumption. This study contributes to advertising discourse by highlighting how colour functions as a medium of meaning-making and consumption through the lens of multimodal analysis.

Keywords: colour, femininity, advertising, semiotics, consumption

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary advertising has seen how colours are being used in various advertising modes. However, they not only function as decorative elements but also serve as powerful semiotic resources that assist or even shape the audience's understanding of the advertisement and the product advertised (Ijam & Abbaas, 2019; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002); especially if the colours are used effectively together with the text (Zhang et al., 2018). Among the colours used, pink has been widely employed in advertisements, often to target the female audience and consumers (Atkinson et al., 2024; Koller, 2008; Mehrjoo et al., 2024). This trend can also be observed in Malaysian advertising, which heavily relies on the colour pink to connect with its female audience.

While the use of pink may appear naturalised or even taken for granted, its meanings are neither fixed nor neutral. Traditionally associated with femininity and softness, pink has been widely employed in advertising to address female consumers and reinforce gendered identities (Jonauskaitė et al., 2021; Koller, 2008). However, colour is a socially constructed semiotic resource that carries different connotations depending on cultural and temporal contexts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). Therefore, this study aims to examine how the colour pink functions as a medium of meaning-making and consumption through multimodal analysis in the context of Malaysian YouTube advertising.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advertising, Gender Identity, and Consumerism

Advertising serves as a powerful tool that both constrains and enables the construction of identity, linking gender and consumerism in several ways. Traditional advertising essentially perpetuates femininity, objectification, body dissatisfaction, and stereotypical gender roles and identities through its advertising messages (Dai et al., 2024). Gender identities are constructed through symbols, imagery, and even subtle cues that formulate the association of masculinity and femininity. The relationship between the cues and the

association further shapes society's perception of whether products and services are intended for men or women (Sandhu, 2018).

However, the advertising meanings are not simply imposed, as women actively interpret and negotiate these messages, thus making advertising a symbol for promoting or resisting gender identities (Hogg & Garrow, 2003; Sandhu, 2018). Some women perceive the stereotypical portrayals as harmful (Åkestam, 2017). From here, it becomes clear that advertising has a complex nature, as it not only shapes identity through imagery but also through consumer practices (Dai et al., 2024; Hogg & Garrow, 2003). Therefore, consumerism becomes a place where gender identity is constantly being shaped, to some extent, contested, and commodified.

It is also important to consider how various factors, such as modesty, Islamic values, and multiculturalism, influence the advertising landscape in the context of Malaysia. Local studies reveal that beauty advertising continues to promote the idea of slimness and fair skin, as well as portraying stereotypical femininity (Raslie & Zaidi, 2022; Veloo & Mustafa, 2023). Additionally, some consumers are now wary of the unrealistic or stereotypical portrayals in Malaysian advertisements (Azmi & Rahman, 2022; Rahim et al., 2011). These findings suggest that it is beneficial to consider the unique socio-cultural context of Malaysia when discussing Malaysian advertising.

Recent studies on gender and digital advertising further highlight how online platforms provide new spaces for constructing and negotiating feminine identities. In Malaysia, online and social media advertising continue to reproduce and reshape traditional gender roles. YouTube advertisements continue to depict gendered stereotypes through roles, attire, and voiceovers, although some portrayals have shifted toward empowerment narratives (Shamim & Hassim, 2021). Similarly, Instagram beauty advertisements show that language and visuals work together to construct women as both empowered and objectified consumers (Raslie & Zaidi, 2022). Collectively, these studies suggest that gender representations on digital advertising platforms like YouTube are crucial for examining how femininity is performed and consumed in contemporary media.

Colour in Advertising and the Semiotics of Pink

Colours in advertising help convey certain emotions in the message and influence consumers to purchase the advertised products. Past research explored the notion of how colours particular emotions within consumers, and brands and advertisers capitalise on these emotions to engage consumers effectively. For instance, the red colour symbolises urgency and excitement, while blue represents trust and calmness (Zhang et al., 2018). These colours are strategically used to appeal to the consumers. It also reported that the use of colour and text in advertising often provides positive responses and increases attention from the audience (Zhang et al., 2018).

Additionally, colour is a social semiotic resource, indicating that the meanings of colour are shaped by the culture and context in which it is used (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). Hence, this association of colours, meanings, and emotions is evident in current advertising, such as the use of pink colour in advertisements targeting women. This colour is commonly used in modern advertising, especially in digital advertising related to the 'pink tax.' In this context, advertisers pay higher costs when creating advertisements targeted at female audiences. However, the additional charges imposed on advertisers are often passed on to consumers, as women frequently pay higher prices for similar items compared to those marketed to their male counterparts (Mehrjoo et al., 2024).

Pink as a colour is traditionally associated with femininity, softness, and innocence (Jonauskaite et al., 2021; Koller, 2008). Contemporary advertising has now associated pink with feminine power and independence (Atkinson et al., 2024; Koller, 2008). While pink is traditionally associated with femininity, it can also symbolise youth and cuteness, which may cater to different age demographics (Koh, 2020). Past research has also shown that the use of pink in marketing has been personalised using Artificial Intelligence to improve its effectiveness and tailor it to the diverse demographic of women (Beyari, 2024).

In the Malaysian context, pink is also associated with the idea of femininity, youth, and purity (Lau & Lee, 2018; Sulaiman & Zain, 2020). Past studies on Malaysian advertising do not explicitly address the role of

colour, such as pink, in influencing or shaping feminine ideals. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the strategic use of pink in Malaysian advertising to understand how this colour reinforces the stereotypical portrayal of femininity or how it redefines feminine ideals in the Malaysian setting.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilising multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). MDA was chosen because it enables a systematic analysis of meaning through various semiotic modes, including language, visuals, and colour (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). This study analysed Malaysian advertisements by drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) grammar of visual design and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity model to examine the relationship between pink colour in constructing feminine identity and consumerism in Malaysian advertising.

Data Selection

The data consisted of three recent Malaysian YouTube video advertisements from different brands targeting women: Kotex, Cosmoderm, and Silkygirl. The advertisements were purposively selected by following the criteria:

1. The advertisement places the pink colour as the visual prominence
2. The advertisement must have a caption or voice-over to assist with language analysis
3. The campaign's focus on female consumers
4. The advertisement on the brand's YouTube page must come from the Malaysian branch if the brand is not Malaysian, and
5. The video was published in 2024-2025 to ensure its contemporary relevance

Data Analysis

The study utilised screenshots taken from the advertisements, which were captured at key frames where the colour pink was most salient, to examine the use of pink and its meanings in the advertisements. Then, the first stage of analysis was conducted by employing Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) grammar of visual design. The analysis focused on three metafunctions of visual grammar: representational, interactive, and compositional. The attention, however, was primarily on the use of pink colour in the advertisements. The second stage of analysis employed Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity model, which was applied to the verbal text, including spoken slogans, captions, and voice-overs, to see how language and colour work together to define meanings in the advertisements.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed two themes that illustrate how the colour pink is used to construct meanings of femininity in the advertisements: (1) redefining femininity and (2) femininity as a journey. In addition, the study examined the connection between feminine identity and consumerism as a final point of discussion.

Redefining Femininity

Redefining femininity focuses on how the analysed advertisements challenge and reframe the traditional understanding of femininity. Traditionally, pink is associated with softness and innocence (Jonauskaitė et al., 2021; Koller, 2008). However, in these advertisements, pink is associated with empowerment, confidence, and power. The advertisements do not simply promote self-care or beauty products. However, they are connected to specific identities through the use of pink colour and accompanying captions and/or voice-overs.



Figure 1 Frame taken from a Kotex advertisement showing a female symbol in the middle of two female characters (Source: Kotex)

For example, in the Kotex advertisement (Figure 1), the colour pink was prominently used in the frame. Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) emphasise the importance of salience, a system within compositional metafunction, in an image. Salience is related to the visual weight of an element and its relationship with other elements in the image. In the case of the Kotex advertisement, in the middle of the frame, there is a female symbol (♀). The symbol is in pink and is also the biggest element in the frame. This placement, size, and colour indicate how important this symbol is. As the advertisement promoted sanitary pads, the symbol reinforced the intended audience of this advertisement, which is female.

Besides that, there are a few negative words such as *bully*, *tak mampu* (incompetent), *lemah* (weak), *lemah* (weak or feeble), *ejek* (mock), *tak ori* (not original), moving towards the central symbol. These negative words are stigma or stereotypes often directed at women. However, when they collide with the ♀ symbol, they crumble and burst, visually signifying women's empowerment. This action demonstrates how women can challenge the negative assumptions or stereotypes imposed upon them.

The accompanying caption and voice-over also strengthen this action. In this frame, the accompanying caption, "We are totally smashing that stigma", reinforced the idea of women fighting against the stigma and stereotypes placed upon them. The material process from Halliday and Matthiessen's transitivity model, as illustrated in this caption, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Material process of the Kotex advertisement

Actor	Process: Material	Goal
We	are totally smashing	that stigma

The word 'we' assumed the position of the Actor in this process, as the doer of the action. 'We' refers to women, although it was not directly stated in the caption. However, the female symbol and the two represented women in the image indicate that this Actor represents the women. The positioning of women as the Actors here shows that women are given the power to perform the action of smashing or destroying the Goal. The Goal in this process is 'that stigma', and the stigma here refers to the negative words heading towards the female symbol. Thus, the caption reinforces the advertisement's message that women have the power to challenge and overcome the stereotypes imposed upon them. The positioning of 'we' as the Actor in the material process emphasises women's agency and empowerment.



Figure 2 Frame taken from a Cosmoderm advertisement showing several women walking towards the camera (Source: Cosmoderm)

Another instance is the advertisement from Cosmoderm, a Malaysian skincare brand (Figure 2). The frame shows a group of women walking forward towards the camera. In this example, the soft pink colour was used in contrast to the hot pink colour in the Kotex advertisement. Even though different variation of pink colour was used in the advertisements, both advertisements convey a similar message of redefining femininity. The soft pink colour in this frame is also ‘accompanied’ by a red colour, which often symbolises power and dominance (Jonauskaitė et al., 2021). Here, the presence of an intense colour helps to strengthen the redefinition of femininity. Femininity in this advertisement is also redefined by portraying a diverse group of confident women who move forward together.

The action of walking forward to the camera can be analysed through the narrative representation of Kress and van Leeuwen’s grammar of visual design. The action of women walking forward creates a vector of movement, showcasing their agency as the Actors in this advertisement. Similar to the Kotex advertisement, the women here have the role of the doer in the action. Out of this group of women, a woman wearing a pink blouse was positioned as the center of the frame. Based on her attire, she appears to be a medical professional. Another woman, also in pink, is slightly behind her and wearing an apron. Her career is not clearly stated in the advertisement; however, both women have a confident stride, showing that the type of career they have does not matter, as every career is important.

This frame also contains an accompanying caption: TIMELESS BEAUTY, RADIATE CONFIDENCE (Figure 1). The transitivity processes involved here are relational and behavioural. The analysis of each process is shown in Table 2 and Table 3, respectively.

Table 2 Relational process of the Cosmoderm advertisement

Carrier	Process: Relational	Attribute
(Women)	(are)	timeless beauty

In the analysis in Table 2, neither the carrier nor the process is explicitly mentioned in the caption. However, it is implied that the carrier is ‘women’ because there is a visual clue given in the frame, which is the women walking forward. Therefore, the verb that indicates this process is relational is ‘are’ because ‘timeless beauty’ is an attribute that describes the women in the frame.

Table 3 Behavioural process of the Cosmoderm advertisement

Behaver	Process: Behavioural	Phenomenon
(Women)	radiate	confidence

The represented participant in this behavioural process is also implied due to the presence of the visual clue. The advertisement suggests that timeless beauty is not merely an external appearance but a source of inner strength, from which confidence radiates. Thus, beauty is re-signified as a form of empowerment rather than passive attractiveness. This example demonstrates that femininity is redefined in the advertisement. Even though it is still tied to traditional beauty standards, such as the expectation of looking beautiful forever, this concept is being expanded by incorporating confidence.

The advertisements from Kotex and Cosmoderm both use the colour pink to reshape ideas of femininity. In the Kotex advertisement, pink is bold and dominant, appearing in the female symbol that stands at the centre of the frame. Negative words move towards the symbol but are destroyed upon impact, showing that women can overcome stigma and stereotypes. Similarly, the Cosmoderm advertisement employs softer shades of pink, complemented by red, to convey strength and power. A group of women walking forward creates an image of confidence and agency, with the caption ‘TIMELESS BEAUTY, RADIATE CONFIDENCE’ highlighting that beauty is linked not only to appearance but also to inner strength. Together, these examples show that pink is used to redefine femininity as a combination of beauty, confidence, and empowerment, moving away from older, more limited stereotypes (Atkinson et al., 2024; Koller, 2008).

Femininity as a Journey

The advertisement that highlights femininity is from Silkygirl, a Malaysian cosmetic brand (Figure 3). In this advertisement, the visual and verbal elements work together to frame femininity as a personal journey. In this selected frame, a woman is at the centre, framing her as the primary focus. Additionally, the blurred background ensures that she is the most salient element in the image. The woman is wearing a soft pink blouse and is seated in front of a pink drink.



Figure 3 Frame taken from a Silkygirl advertisement showing a woman in pink sitting at the centre (Source: Silkygirl Cosmetics)

Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) emphasise the role of Gaze in the interaction metafunction. The vector of her eyeline is not looking directly towards the camera, but rather to someone sitting in front of her. This indirect gaze categorises the image as an offer rather than a demand, meaning that the woman does not seek direct engagement from the viewer but instead presents or offers an idea. What is being offered here is the notion of femininity, symbolically reinforced by the pink tones and supported by the caption and voice-over: ‘It helps me to connect with my feminine self.’

Halliday’s transitivity analysis further clarifies the meaning of the caption and voice-over. The analysis is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Material process of the Silkygirl advertisement

Actor	Process: Material	Goal
It	helps	me to connect with my feminine self

The Actor in this clause is “It”, referring implicitly to beauty or cosmetics (Silkygirl products). The Process is material (helps), showing that the product plays an active role in enabling action. The Goal “me to connect with my feminine self” positions the user as someone who achieves self-discovery through the product. When combined with the visual representation, where the woman gazes away from the viewer in an offer image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), the meaning becomes clearer. The represented participant is not demanding attention but instead offering an idea, in which cosmetics function as a tool for connection with femininity. Thus, beauty is reframed as an enabler of empowerment and self-identity, rather than mere surface-level appearance.

Theme 2 illustrates how advertising constructs femininity through the use of image offers and the material process embedded in captions and voice-over. In the Silkygirl advertisement, the woman’s gaze is averted from the audience, creating an offer rather than a demand (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). The product, represented implicitly through the Actor “It” in the caption “It helps me to connect with my feminine self,” assumes agency in enabling the Goal of self-connection. Here, cosmetics are positioned not only as beauty enhancers but also as active agents of emotional growth and affirmation of identity.

This example demonstrates how advertisements continue to draw on traditional associations of pink with femininity, softness, and innocence (Jonauskaitė et al., 2021; Koller, 2008; Lau & Lee, 2018; Sulaiman & Zain, 2020). However, in this context, the use of pink is not framed negatively. Instead, it is recontextualised to emphasise self-discovery and personal growth, presenting femininity in a positive and empowering light.

Feminine Identity and Consumerism

Across the three advertisements, femininity is presented as fluid and multifaceted. The Kotex ad frames women as empowered agents who resist stigma, Cosmoderm emphasises confidence and inner strength alongside beauty, and Silkygirl highlights self-discovery and connection to one’s feminine self. While each advertisement uses different shades of pink and visual strategies, they all show that femininity in Malaysian advertising is no longer confined to a single, traditional meaning. Instead, femininity is reinterpreted as empowerment, confidence, and growth, broadening how women can identify themselves (Koller, 2008).

At the same time, these changes of meaning are still closely tied to consumer culture. Each brand positions its product as a tool for achieving these identities: Kotex empowers women to challenge stigma, Cosmoderm enables them to radiate confidence, and Silkygirl helps them connect with their feminine self. This reflects what Goldman (1992) describes as ‘commodity feminism,’ where feminist values, such as empowerment and independence, are incorporated into advertising to market products. In this way, femininity and identity are shaped not only through cultural symbols such as colour, gaze, and action but also through consumption itself. Empowerment, confidence, and self-discovery are framed as accessible outcomes, but only through the act of consuming these products.

While advertisements often position pink as a symbol of empowerment, these representations may still perpetuate normative ideas of femininity that are tied to appearance and consumption. In Malaysia's multicultural and Muslim-majority context, pink may also evoke notions of modesty or moral femininity, showing how global beauty discourses are reinterpreted through local cultural values.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how the colour pink is used in Malaysian advertisements to construct ideas of femininity and connect them to consumerism. Through the analysis of three advertisements, two themes were identified: 1) redefining femininity and 2) femininity as a journey. The use of pink was shown to go beyond traditional associations of passivity, as it was also linked to empowerment, confidence, and even self-discovery. At the same time, the products being advertised were positioned as tools for achieving these identities, illustrating the close connection between femininity and consumer culture.

By looking at both the visual and linguistic elements of the advertisements, this study highlights how colours such as pink continue to carry symbolic meanings. The findings suggest that advertising plays a significant role in shaping how femininity is perceived and perpetuated in Malaysian society.

FURTHER RESEARCH RECOMMENDATION

This study focused on three Malaysian YouTube advertisements, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Future research could include a larger corpus of advertisements from different brands and digital platforms to provide broader insights into how colour constructs femininity and consumer identity. Additionally, audience reception studies or surveys could be conducted to examine how different demographic groups, including men and gender-neutral consumers, interpret the use of pink in advertising. Further research may also consider Malaysia's multicultural and religious contexts, exploring how cultural and Islamic values shape both the meanings and reception of pink in advertisements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to University Technology MARA (UiTM) for the support and resources provided in the completion of this study.

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