

## CONVERGENCE OF VISUAL INTERPRETATION THROUGH COLLECTIVE PRACTICES OF MASCULINITY IN A MALAYSIAN TELEVISED SHOW

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### ABSTRACT

A televised show is much more than a mere tool of entertainment especially when it concerns concepts such as gender and masculinity. The dynamics of a television scene can articulate different discourses of masculinity within the interplay of its visual processes. These visual processes could create meanings that either reinforce or challenge societal notions of masculinity. This can be further compounded when repeatedly broadcast to a particular segment of society that is both conservative and religious. This paper investigates how masculinity is performed through collective practices in the visual interpretation of a televised show, *Oh My English!* Adopting the *Representation and Viewer Network* together with the *Visual Social Actor Network*, this paper analyses the visual features of group interaction among the main male teenage social actors in a particular scene from an episode of the show. Group performances within scenes are also discussed and the findings are linked together to explore the representation and construction of masculinity. The findings reveal not only the interpretation of masculinity from different hierarchal positionings through a heterosexual-heteronormative perspective but also that the presence of a female social actor plays a significant role in 'doing' masculinity. The findings furthermore highlight that dissent in the performance of heteronormative masculinity is possible and in fact is visually represented.

**Keywords:** media discourse, social actor representation, hegemonic masculinity, visual interpretation, television show

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A televised show has much power when it comes to representing gender and gendered discourses in terms of maintaining or challenging gendered notions such as femininity and masculinity in society. A televised show not only can reflect the narratives and discourses of the 'native mainstream' culture (Eswari, 2014), but can also "provide symbolic imaginary of those in the real world through the representation of its social actors" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 138).

Discourses are "re-contextualization of social practices" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 5). It is through representation of social actors that social practices are transformed into discourses. Therefore, any form of media content communicated to the viewers, in whichever way "abstract can be interpreted as representations of social practices" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 5) depending on the problematic discourses in a particular society at its historical moment of time. However, it all depends on how viewers interpret and relate to television content while connecting it to real life experiences by 'assimilating' it and then taking the content further with the existing beliefs that viewers hold on to, which are culturally and socially accepted (Götz and Lemish, 2008).

The representation of masculinity as communicated through television may reinforce popular culture or "common sight" assumptions of its viewers (Berger, 1972, p. 9). The reproduction of common sight, which is the social cultural practice accepted by a particular society, could further bring about choices to the viewers of whom to 'include or exclude' (van Leeuwen, 2008) in real life social practices. Furthermore, as discourses are "re-contextualization of social practices" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 5), they are a reflection of social practices that can be contextualized through the sense of social cognition by the viewers in relation to real life social issues or situations that exist in a particular moment of time.

## 2. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

In Malaysia, men who fit into the hegemonically heteronormative paradigm are honoured and empowered by a society that is predominantly conservative and religious. In general, the Malaysian society's beliefs and values are deeply entrenched in patriarchal heteronormativity. Hence, homosexuality is not tolerated and is not sanctioned by society. Individuals perceived to be involved in 'homosexual acts', regardless of age or consent, face fines, corporal punishment, or imprisonment. In such circumstances, religious and cultural taboos against same-sex sexual conducts are evidently widespread, judging from the prevalence of religious and legal prosecutions.

Furthermore, religious authorities, under the 'Minor Offenses Act', are given the power by the state to charge individuals of any 'indecent behaviour', especially among males of any age group involved in 'unnatural sexual acts'. Those convicted would face a maximum of fourteen days in jail. In addition, education authorities are allowed to conduct 'corrective therapies' on identified male students with 'effeminate' or 'gay' characteristics, which include 'appearance resembling the opposite sex'. These corrective therapies are authorized by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) based on their interpretation of the '*Sharia Law*'.

Unsurprisingly, in recent years, resistance towards homosexuality is observed to be on the rise in the mainstream Malaysian media. In 2017, a competition offering a cash prize of US\$1,000 for a short video production encouraging 'gay prevention' was launched by the *Ministry of Health* (MOH) and reported by local media ("Malaysia offers up to \$1,000 for best 'gay prevention' video", 2017). Coincidentally, in the same year, the *Film Censorship Board of Malaysia* (LPF) a government organisation formed to vet films, demanded a "gay moment" in the movie '*Beauty and the Beast*' produced by *Walt Disney Pictures* to be censored. The request for censorship was reported in foreign online media (Levine, 2017). In this movie, the song featuring the gay character '*Le Fou*' was considered indecent and 'promoting negative values' to the Malaysian society by Islamic scholars and religious groups. At the same time, perceived effeminacy in young male teenagers has given rise to cases of physical bullying. One such case that went viral on all Malaysian media was of an eighteen-year-old named Nhaveen who succumbed to death after being tortured by his ex-secondary school peers due to his 'soft traits' (Thevadass & Sekaran, 2017). His death was debated by certain ministries such as the Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN), Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM), Ministry of Health (MOH), and Ministry of Education (MOE). While his death was attributed to bullying, significantly, ministry representatives hardly discussed Nhaveen's case from the angle of homophobia.

Curiously, a male character presupposed with effeminacy exists in a locally produced Malaysian sitcom broadcast nationwide. Specifically, this sitcom reaches ten thousand schools with the support of the MOE in order for students to learn English in a fun and enjoyable way. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the discourse on masculinity through the visual representation of the main male social actors in a single scene in *Oh My English!* This study intends to examine how the representation of social actors in a show can influence viewers' perception on masculinity from a hegemonic perspective. The research specifically looks at how the social actors through their character roles portray masculinity through collective practices in the presence of a female social actor.

## 3. MEDIA'S INTERPRETATION

Any form of reality broadcasted through media may "possibly adopt the perspective of dominant groups" (van Dijk, 1995) and further "have the potential to arouse and shape emotions" (Doveling, Scheve, and Konijn, 2010). Equally, media's ideological work according to Fairclough (1995) consists of three aspects, which are construction of social relations, construction of social identity, and certain ways of representing the world. The media serves the viewers with a concoction of pastiche, parody of deliberate exaggeration and intertextuality. Such exaggeration and intertextuality tend to intersect through 'visual interpretation' in the concept of media discourse (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 2006) from a 'broader multimodal concept' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Machin, 2007). Additionally, visual codes can express meanings

drawn from common cultural sources of social practices when communicated to its viewers through various interplay of stylistic elements such as storyline, supporting character roles, mise-en-scene and colour. In such instances, the representation of social actors as ‘doing something to or for the viewers’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2007; van Leeuwen, 2008) can be dynamically articulated. Hence, even a fraction of the media’s representation communicated to its viewers can lead to “historical change, sometimes even violent change as in iconoclasm” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 25).

According to Dyer (1986), any televised context does not stand alone as it reflects on some form of ideology, reworks it and produces new meanings out of it and allows for diverse interpretations. Such ideological interpretation depends on whether viewers choose to either accept or challenge them depending on the values or beliefs they hold on to. Nevertheless, when reduced to a few spatial determinations, a single scene of a televised show can convey a ‘rich and profound sense’ (Sartre, 2004) to its viewers. This is significant in Malaysia, especially when it involves the notion of gender, as gender is intrinsically interlinked with conservative, religious and cultural aspects in the Malaysian society (Mohd Muzafar Idrus et al., 2014).

#### 4. GENDER ROLES AND RELATIONS

Among young male undergrads, socio-cultural factors such as family environment, besides the media, play an important role in shaping popular lifestyle patterns of gendered roles in society (Khalaf et al., 2013). Interestingly, these lifestyle patterns assist in shaping and reinforcing the notion of masculinity[s], especially from a heteronormative perspective among young men in Malaysia. A successful relationship with women within the confines of marriage, and being a family man are perceived as fulfilling their gendered roles and relations as a ‘man’ in society (Khalaf et al., 2013). Moreover, young Malaysian male undergrads have self-reported that they perceive themselves as conforming to the traditional norms of masculinity; thus, pointing to the dominance of hegemonic heteronormativity among men within the Malaysian society (Sultana Alam, 2015). Such perception also shows that gender stereotypes and behaviours of the traditional heteronormative roles and relations exist even among young educated men in the Malaysian society.

Additionally, it is the norm for the Malaysian government to retain and support the hybridisation of popular culture’s heterosexual norms in the media. Such hybridisation can be done mainly for the sake of maintaining and promoting ‘political hegemony’ (Siti Zanariah, 2011). Political hegemony may also possibly assist society and those who are influential within it to exercise their power to maintain the dominance of heterosexuality, such as conservative religious values and beliefs, besides patriarchy. Consequently, these values and beliefs would in a way assist in upholding heterosexuality and marginalising any other gendered beliefs that oppose the traditional norms.

Furthermore, according to Fauziah Ahmad et al. (2012), televised shows do influence the attitudes of young Malaysians regarding their sexuality. She argues

that most young men tend to develop social constructs about themselves and the environment through media content; significantly these social constructs are restricted to hegemonic norms and positionings, which in turn give prominence to gendered behaviours and stereotypes.

In the name of entertainment, localized-televised shows usually tend to articulate humour through the depiction of a male character role with the presupposition of effeminacy. However, these roles do not directly address effeminacy through the narratives of the show. Instead, they bring about the presupposition of effeminacy through the character role’s physical or bodily characteristics such as gesture and manner of speech apart from relating such roles to activities associated with women. Indirectly, these patterns of behaviour of a man in the Malaysian society are naturally perceived as ‘common sense’ (Yoong, 2017) or ‘soft traits’ (Brannon, 1976) in comparison to ideal heterosexual men. Often, these character roles are to be laughed at in the name of entertainment. One such effeminate character role exists in the sitcom *Oh My English!*

#### 5. RELEVANT CONCEPTS

##### 5.1 Representation and Gender Performance

Representation at a basic level is the way in which signs, in any medium of communication, are used to construct meaning of any aspect of reality. This means representation could allow for various interpretations of its meaning based on the understanding, knowledge, experiences, or beliefs of a certain society, social group or even individual. However, the argument on representation is that no matter how realistic or natural a particular representation turns out to be, in order for it to be meaningful, it needs to be shared within a particular society in its present historical moment of time. This means representation is constitutive, that is, having the power to establish by reflecting on reality or in representing to create a new reality in its present time of an event. Therefore, representation is full of messages that ‘embody values and ideologies’ (Hoffmann and Johnson, 1998). The representation of gender through social actors’ performances or depictions, therefore, may embody values and ideologies either for or against the values accepted by a society.

Gender is socially classified as masculine and feminine, and confined to ‘socially constructed roles’ or cultural norms (Cameron, 1997). These roles and norms are related to attributes, behaviours and activities that are culturally considered appropriate for men and women performed in accordance to a particular society’s values. Moreover, gender in its abstract form is seen as an act of ‘performativity’ (Butler, 1990) through the ‘embodied reiteration’ of particular acts, specifically linguistic acts. These linguistic acts are likely to occur at every level of language as an omnipresent feature of “discursive articulation of all interaction” (Weatherall, 2002). The embodied reiteration of these acts often means that certain representations and performances of gender are legitimised while others are de-legitimising.

### 5.2 *Hegemonic Masculinity*

'Hegemonic masculinity', a term popularized by Connell (1995) is a concept that originates from Gramsci's term of 'hegemony' (Gramsci, 1978). Hegemony as used by Gramsci, was used to describe the stabilisation of class relations. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is rooted in the subordination of women, and thus legitimizes 'heteronormativity' in men. The support for hegemonic masculinity discourses reproduces hegemonic gender ideologies which are the 'heteronormative practices' (Baker, 2008), regarded as the norms in a society. These hegemonic norms privilege men to exercise their rights over the opposite sex, naturally without resistance and at the same time, authorized by society, the state and institutions. Hence, hegemonic masculinity could be defined as being heterosexually normative in the eye of institutional power's cultural ideal, or by an individual man himself.

Interestingly, hegemonic masculinity is an ideology based on a hierarchy of dominant alignment roles not only "men over women" but also "men over other men" (Kiesling, 1998, p.71). Therefore, there are not only different but also, 'conflicting ways of being a man' (Connell, 1995). These conflicting ways are identified by Connell (1995) through the different hierarchal positioning of masculinity, which includes the hegemonic, the complicit and the subordinate forms.

The complicit form describes a man with heteronormative traits who prefers to participate along with the hegemonic group, but does not play an active role (Connell, 1995, 2005) in pursuing his heteronormative-hegemonic composure. In contrast to the complicit form, the subordinate form opposes the hegemonic-heteronormative act, and thus undergoes oppression and cultural exclusion by society, institution or the state. Subordination may cause dominant men, such as those of hegemonic nature, to marginalize the ones who oppose the hegemonic norms. As such, power dominance results when men, either in a group or individually, apply legitimised hegemonic acts over those who oppose the norms.

Connell (1995, 2005) further posits that through the existence of the 'other', power relations come into force between men who are for and those who are against hegemonic masculinity. However, a crucial point to consider in hegemonic masculinity is the seeing of women as sexual objects, and thus providing heterosexual men with sexual validation (Donaldson, 1993; Happé and Hüsken, 2007). Among the different forms of masculinity, the hegemonic form, therefore, is dominant. It is dominant because it is hegemonic and it is the only sanctioned legitimised way to be a man within a society that honours traditional norms.

### 5.3 *Collective Practices of Masculinity*

"Men's lives could be collective and at the same time turn up to be individual" in terms of masculinity (Connell, 2005, p. 106). Within the collective practices of masculinity, 'self-construction' (Kosetzi, 2012) could be symbolically present depending on how masculinity is being represented or accomplished. In terms of masculinity as a collective practice, it could be shaped through a "collective dimension" (Connell, 2005, p. 106). This collective dimension can be realized via the address of institutional

and cultural presence via school policies, activities or masculine authorities. In such ways, collective practices of masculinity may operate at the social level, addressed not only via the institutional order of society, but also through social organisation. Therefore, collective practices of masculinity bring about the identification of a 'man' in society in an aspect larger than his individual 'self'. As such, the 'self-construction' of masculinity, for example from a particular hierarchal positioning, such as the hegemonic form, can enter into a transition to a wider political and cultural agenda. Such an agenda collectively can allow hegemonic men to facilitate their own political dominance and recognition in society. At the same time, the hegemonic group can collectively be the "bearer of masculinity" (Connell, 2005, p. 106) in a society that upholds the hegemonic form of 'homosocial' (Bird, 1996) relationship. However, collective practices do result in the "stratification of masculinities within a society and power struggle" (Maki, 2014).

### 5.4 *The Male Gaze*

The concept of the 'male gaze' introduced by Mulvey (1975) opened the door to a feminist critique of Hollywood movies. The female body is subjected to the heterosexual male gaze, which confirms the dominance of patriarchy, putting men in a superior position compared to women.

As such, films are gateways to political implications by making the "male dominant gaze the key component within a hegemonic tradition that objectifies and subjugates women as powerless" (Giannino and Campbell, 2012). At the same time, it empowers heterosexual men and reinforces their heteronormative identity. In addition, empowerment through the male gaze has been universally and socially defined, and naturally managed by societies though deriving from various cultural and religious backgrounds.

Furthermore, media mainly represents women as passive and objectifies them visually through the eyes of the heterosexual man. From a viewers' perspective, women are thus represented as passive objects of male desire through the focus of the male gaze, again making women secondary compared to men's positioning from a social gendered perspective. Just as significantly, the male gaze reinforces the notion of hegemonic heteronormative masculinity and legitimises it as the most sanctioned form of masculinity in society.

## 6. METHODOLOGY

### 6.1 *Integrating Visual Representational Networks*

The *Representation and Viewer Network* (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 141) (see Appendix 1) as well as the *Visual Social Actor Network* (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 136) (see Appendix 2) are two networks of the joint work on the theory of grammar of visual design by both Kress and van Leeuwen (2008). The *Representation and Viewer Network* provides the analysis of the visuals effects from the camera angles in relation to viewers' and social actors' gaze.

On the other hand, the *Visual Social Actor Network* critically analyses the inclusion and exclusion of the social actors, through relevant stylistic effects and the content such as the narrative or storyline. The “combination of both content and effects” can assist in the understanding of the role mass media plays in society and societal attitudes (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 256).

Through the frames of a televised scene the *Representation and Viewer Network* (van Leeuwen, 2008) would assist in the visual interpretation from three different dimensions. The three dimensions are:

- *Social distance*
- *Social relation*
- *Social interaction*

These three dimensions “need to be always there” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 141) in order to represent the parameters between the social actors with the viewers as each social dimension does not work alone.

- *Social Distance* relates to *Close Up* shots (CU) or *Long Shot* (LS) which socially creates a close or distant relationship between the viewers and the social actors. In television, the visuals could also take the form of other shots such as *Medium Close Up* (MCU) or *Medium Long Shot* (MLS). For instance, LS establishes a setting or the mood, while MCU or MLS can demand a close relation with the social actor and the background from the viewers.
- *Social Relation* relates to the camera angle and demands for involvement or power from the angle of viewers or the social actors. *Involvement* takes place when social actors are represented from *frontal angle* with viewers while *detachment* is seen from an *oblique angle* with the viewers. *Power* through *high angle* of social actors demands viewers’ power over what is being represented. Through the *eye-level shot*, the social actors demand equality with the viewers and the *low angle* shot means representation of social actors have power over the viewers.
- *Social Interaction* is represented with *direct* and *indirect address*. Via *direct address*, the represented social actors look at the viewers; while through *indirect address*, the social actors do not look at the viewers. These three dimensional representations through the visual process would be of viewers’ scrutiny in accordance to their real life social cultural experiences and knowledge. The three dimensions could also lead to accuse and critique a person or group or reflect to the viewers (ourselves as people or alike to the social actors. This ultimately presents the real life seen from within members of own class or society.

The *Visual Social Actor Network* presents the ways in which ‘actions and reactions’ are represented in discourse (van Leeuwen, 2008) where visualizations are seen as the most complete and explicit ways of explaining things. Therefore, the visuals reproduced in a particular context could be associated to its place of origin (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 137) with its focus on the popular culture of that particular “place” of the viewer. In this network, there are choices of categorisation which play

an important role. Visually, *exclusion* may exclude or bring the representation of a social actor into the background, while *inclusion* may present the social actors as *agent* or *patient*. Through action, they may further be categorised visually as of *specific* or *generic* and of *individual* or *group*. The social actors can also be categorised either as *culturally* or *biologically generic*.

## 6.2 Data

This is a qualitative case study of the data sourced from a Malaysian sitcom, *Oh My English!* This show is set in a Malaysian secondary school classroom and broadcast on *ASTRO*, the most subscribed satellite TV provider in Malaysia. An educational sitcom supported by the Malaysian MOE, this show is watched by secondary school students both in schools and at home. The sitcom, both its premiere and repeat episodes, has been broadcast on the *ASTRO TVIQ* channel since 2012. It was in Season 3 in 2014 that five main male characters began to be featured regularly in the sitcom.

The data type was selected from episode 1 of Season 3, titled *Welcome Back Class*, where all five main social actors interact for the first time. The length of this scene is one minute and twenty seconds, in ten frames. Therefore, “relatively small number of discourse fragments” to analyse hegemonic discourse would be possible as discourses of any nature, are “historically embedded with repercussions on current and future discourses” (Wodak and Busch, 2004, p. 111).

## 6.3 Character Roles

The five main male social actors are all depicted as a group of sixteen-year-old classmates who are good friends. They are Mazlee, Jibam, SYS, Zack and Khai.

- Mazlee is the school’s fashion guru. Most of the time, he prefers to be with the female classmates rather than his male counterparts. He sits next to Anusha, a female classmate. Mazlee’s exaggerated gestures and body language, as well as interests, presupposes him as having characteristics typical of a woman, and thus comes across as effeminate.
- Jamil, nicknamed Jibam, aspires to be a comedian in a television show. He is portrayed as inquisitive and girl crazy. He is tall and neat in his appearance. Jibam shares his thoughts about girls with his best friend, SYS.
- See Yew Soon, nicknamed SYS, is always cheerful and playful. He is interested in girls and shares his thoughts with Jibam.
- Zakaria or Zack intends to be a rapper in order to attract the girls in the school. Of all the members of his clique, he is the most confident and bold in articulating his feelings to their female classmates. He is portrayed as a ‘macho’ guy (Khalaf et al., 2013).
- Khairudin, nicknamed Khai, is portrayed as a perfectionist. He prefers not only the things around him to be in order but also expects others around him to meet his sometimes unrealistic expectations. He is in every way the epitome of a well behaved, perfect ‘gentleman’ (Khalaf et al., 2013).

### 6.4 Storyline

The episode opens with a new girl, Putri, arriving at the door of the classroom on her first day at her new secondary school. She enters, and the whole classroom is lighted up brightly, with a magical sound playing in the background. The special effects of light and sound highlight her arrival to the class, and foreshadow her imminent impact on the main male social actors. Upon Putri's arrival, the main male actors, Jibam, SYS, Zack and Khai, except for Mazlee, stand up to have a closer look at her. Amid their stares, Jibam, SYS and Zack individually begin to fantasise about Putri. In each of the boys' fantasy, Putri is transformed into a character that each boy finds appealing. Khai, unlike the other three, does not partake in this fantasy trip, though he does join his three peers in coming forward to have a closer look at Putri.

### 6.5 Coding

For the purpose of analysis, the interactive scene, in accordance with the scene's chronological events, was 'coded' (Chandler, 1994) as visual frames. These frames, therefore, stood as the storyline or narrative within the scene. The nine events within the scene were coded as [1], [1.2], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8] and [9]. It is important to note that the addition of frame [1.2] was necessary to show the transition taking place between events. Therefore, a total of ten frames within a single scene were analysed. These coded visual frames of the interactive scene among the five main male actors would arguably offer an insight into the "multiple competing hegemonic forms at any time, compatible, but some in conflict" (Kiesling, 2006) in terms of masculinity in the televised show. The frames from a camera shots perspective were identified as:

- Long Shot (LS)
- Medium Close Up (MCU)
- Medium Long Shot (MLS)

These were the shots in the form of images that were reinforced throughout the storyline of the scene.

## 7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyses the coded frames based on the scene events of the five main male social actors, who are also classmates. This section is divided into six sub-sections: biological sexual orientation, stereotypical gendered roles, individual male gaze, collective male gaze, complicit within hegemonic group, and subordination via male gaze.

### 7.1 Biological sex differentiation



Figure 1. Frame [1] LS

Figure 2. Frame [1.2] LS

Frame LS [1], together with Frame [1.2], shows the five main male social actors as socially distant, as conveyed by the shot angle. The distant LS shot establishes the classroom setting. As the new girl Putri arrives at the door of the classroom, a bright light falls upon the whole class. Visually, Frame [1] represents the Malaysian secondary school classroom with students who are gender-distinguished through the different school uniforms and colours. The male students wear white shirts with dark green long trousers, while the female students wear white shirts with a turquoise blue pinafore or knee length blouses with *sarong* (baju kurung). The colours of their uniforms visually represent the separation of the two sexes. This can further be socially perceived 'in the real world' (Strinati, 1995) from the biological lens of a typical Malaysian classroom setting, where students are distinguished by their biological sex as male and female students.

### 7.2 Stereotypical Gendered Roles

A transition takes place from the social and biological distribution of the students when the bright light fades away in Frame [1.2]. At this juncture, Jibam, then SYS, followed by Zack and Khai rise from their seats to have a closer look at Putri. The action of rising though done individually, visually establishes the stereotypical performance of heterosexual-heteronormative performances via the action of four young male teenagers faced with an attractive young female. At the same time, the stereotypical action and reaction of the four reflects visually on the four as ritually exercising their male gaze, through facial expressions. Symbolically, the collective action and reaction of the four, albeit exaggerated, may be expected of the young Malaysian men of the traditional heterosexual-heteronormative nature. However, in the background, Mazlee, the fifth member of the group, does not react to Putri's presence in the same way. He shields his eyes first from the bright light, and then from the girl who enters the classroom. Hence, Mazlee's positioning, together with his effeminacy, symbolically designates this character as the 'other', and the one who does not partake in heteronormative act. Mazlee's continued shielding of his eyes stands in stark contrast to the enthralled looks of the other four male social actors.

Mazlee’s positioning and character attributes, therefore, allow for ‘further critique’ (KhosraviNik, 2012) of the expected heteronormative behaviour of the rest of the young men.

7.3 *The Individual Male Gaze*



Figure 3. Frame [2] MCU



Figure 4. Frame [3] MLS

In MCU Frame [2], Jibam is visually represented as close to the viewer and is empowered to the viewer through the male gaze (Mulvey, 1995). He is projected as individually imagining the new female classmate as an angel with wings and in pure white dress with his eyes and mouth, wide opened. However, in Frame [2], Khai is visually and equally present with Jibam however, not in the forefront but visible to the viewers. In such visual positioning, Khai could be an object of scrutiny. His positioning, may suggest, he being complicit – not in the forefront or in line with Jibam, but backgrounded in the performance of the male heterosexual gaze by his heteronormative peer, Jibam. Khai stares at Putri, is mesmerised, however his positioning visually distances him from the viewers.



Figure 5. Frame [4] MCU



Figure 6. Frame [5] MCU

In MCU Frame [4], SYS individually visualizes Putri as an air stewardess. An air stewardess, as featured in Frame [5], is seen as common in “local communities and practice” (Pichler, 2005) across cultures. SYS’s fantasy of Putri reflects on the Malaysian culture and society’s stereotype of a well-groomed, graceful and beautiful

ideal woman as the state-owned ‘Malaysian Airlines’ air stewardess supposedly represents. SYS is closer and socially interactive with the viewer while performing the male gaze.

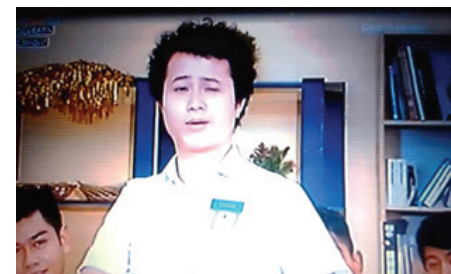


Figure 7. Frame [6] MCU



Figure 8. Frame [7] MLS

Zack, in MCU Frame [6], individually visualises Putri with a tiara on her head and in clothes resembling a princess in Frame [7]. This reflects upon his imagination of a fairy-tale princess is his ‘fantasy figure’ (Connell, 2005, p. 80). Zack is visually presented at eye level with the viewers, assuming an equal power relationship with the viewers. Thus, his representation of the archetypal normative heterosexuality is similar to Jibam, SYS and Khai.

Hence, the three characters are portrayed as performing the male gaze in the presence of an opposite sex with the representation of quintessential and stereotypical heterosexual fantasies and desires. The male gaze which is depicted in three different versions in the analysed frames conforms to the stereotypical characteristics of the traditionally heteronormative man. In Frame [6], three male characters are visible in the background, sitting behind Zack. These three presumably represent the classroom community and the neutrality in the background to further magnify Zack’s disproportionate but somehow plausible reaction. They may also represent the classroom community made up of other young teenaged male students. However, they do not resist as they are seen as smiling and witnessing Zack’s reaction.

7.4 *The Collective Male Gaze*



Figure 9. Frame [8] LS



Figure 10. Frame [9] MLS

In LS Frame [8], Zack and Khai walk towards Jibam and SYS. This event visually signifies the reinforced male collective practices towards the opposite sex. In MLS Frame [9], all four are again prominently positioned together within a frame, amplifying the collective practices of the male gaze, for a close interaction, relation and proximity with the viewer. Hence, Frame [9] presumably underscores the heteronormative practices of heterosexual men as in Frames [1], [1.2] and [8].

Moreover, Frames [2], [4] and [6], in a way, visually interpret the individual male gaze which conforms to the collective practices of heteronormative heterosexual men. The visuals in these frames also reflect on a clichéd representation of hegemonic masculinity. From Frames [1] through [9], the individual male gaze is interpreted stereotypically in different versions, individually and collectively in the scene event through the four social actors.

### 7.5 *Complicit Collective Positioning*

In MLS Frames [2] and [9], Khai though not in the foreground, is visually represented as being in compliance with the other group members who could be perceived as reinforcing the 'normative standards' of masculinity within the heteronormative position. Khai's positioning is "an act of 'complicity'" (Connell, 2005, p. 79) within the hegemonic group. Khai marks himself as the 'other' even within his in-group of heterosexual members who are dynamically exercising their hegemonic positioning as front-liners. At this juncture, Khai's reactions exhibit fluidity in his positioning to the notion of masculinity within a single group of same sex heteronormative males. Khai's representation as such reveals complicity with the performance of the hegemonic masculinity. By staying in the background but yielding to his dominant and heteronormative counterparts, Khai gains recognition as a full-fledged member of a dominant group of men conforming to traditional and expected norms of behavior. This reinforces the assumption that men themselves are prone to segregation within the hegemonic masculine positioning where a dominant role can also take a "non-dominant role while in its active form" (Swain, 2006).

Alternatively, Khai's position of being visually backgrounded with Jibam in Frame [2] and later within the group (see Frame [9]) may benefit the three peers in reinforcing their hierarchal positioning from a hegemonic viewpoint with dominant roles to the viewers. Thus, with visual agency given to Jibam, SYS, Zack and Khai reflect upon complexities where masculinity can be 'internally divided' (Connell, 2005, p. 242) from the hegemonic standpoint. This further indicates the existence of diversity and complexities within a group of men among men, even of the hegemonic nature.

### 7.6 *Subordination and Critique*

Mazlee is in the background, distant and seemingly disempowered from Frames [1.2] to [9]. He seems detached from the collective hegemonic rituals of the other four members of his own group. Mazlee is visually presented in stark contrast with the stereotypical heterosexual male gaze either individually or collectively. In other words, through their hegemonic practices of masculinity, the four young men show great contrast with the 'other'.

Arguably, in Frame [1.2], the normative reactions of Jibam, Khai, SYS and Zack are constructed collectively in direct relation with the subordinate form of Mazlee's positioning. Subordination is also articulated through the individual yet collective stereotypical hegemonic act of the male gaze from Frames [2] to [6] and again through the collective practices of hegemonic male gaze in Frames [8] and [9]. These reinforced visual performances of hegemonic masculinity in turn may reflect upon Mazlee as being positioned outside the legitimate form of maleness that adheres to traditional norms, and represented as the 'other', seen as "expelled from the circle of legitimacy" (Connell, 2005, p. 79).

In comparison to Khai, Mazlee does not visually construct the complicit form as he does not even join his group members. Instead, Mazlee's angle of distance in Frame [1.2] suggests that he is positioned at the margins of the heteronormative masculine paradigm. It can be argued that not socially interacting with the performance of the stereotypical male gaze leads to his own disempowerment and marginalisation (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 141) from the collective in-group of heteronormative males. This is particularly significant if his non-masculine behaviour and effeminacy are also taken into consideration

Mazlee could also be the "mark of control, oppression, and subjugation" (Swain, 2006) through the domination of his male peers in exercising their hegemonic dominance within the classroom. In other words, the four members sustain their privileges in the presence of the new female classmate with him being distant. In such a situation, Mazlee's position could suggest that he is subordinated by the dominant majority's performance of heteronormative masculinity, and as such marginalised and "authorised by an ideology of supremacy" (Connell, 2005 p. 83)

Significantly, Mazlee may also represent those men who find no pleasure in objectifying women as he is distant from the hegemonic act of the 'masses'. The masses may represent collectively the hegemonic men in society restricted to performing and re-enacting the traditional norms accepted by society. Hence, from the viewer's perceptions, he may also be a symbol of the assumption that men who do not partake in the rituals of the male gaze of the heteronormative act of objectifying women, are pushed aside and distanced not only from his peers but society itself. Mazlee, therefore, represents the minority or minorities of those man or men who in reality are considered as 'deviant' in terms of the normative acceptance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005).

Just as importantly and in contrast to the above arguments, Mazlee's visual backgrounding from the collective acts of his male peers could also mean that he actively distances himself from other men who exercise their hegemonic dominance in society, without fear of repercussions. In other words, males who do not identify with hegemonic masculinity may distance themselves from those whom society deems to be normal and non-deviant. In a society restricted by traditional norms, Mazlee could be seen as rejecting the accepted norms of heteronormative behaviour, in the process separating himself "from the project of masculinisation", which in itself suggests a form of agency (Connell, 2005, p. 141). Thus, while Mazlee's visual marginalisation



on the one hand could mean social marginalisation, significantly, on the other hand, it contains within itself a 'critique' of accepted normative masculine behaviour. This then, paves the way for the performance of differing types of masculinities.

## 8. RESULTS

The consent of viewers seems somehow visually negotiated in this scene of the first episode of *Oh My English!* where the consensus of heteronormative acts of men through the "collective practices" (Connell, 2005, p. 106) are accepted and maintained. This establishes visually the dominance of not only 'men over man' but also 'men over women' in society. As Connell (1995) claims that from a hegemonic viewpoint, not only different but conflicting ways of being a man exist; this seems evident within a traditional male dominated society, contextualized within the scene events of *Oh My English!* Alternatively, through the dominance of the hegemonic form the complicit and subordinate form of masculinity comes into existence. This suggests there are males who may or may not conform to the traditional norms. As an example, these effeminate young men may not be interested in the opposite sex. Arguably, they exist in every society, and they may not participate in the rituals of objectifying a woman. When this non-conformity is exposed, it brings to light the existence of the dissenting 'other'.

With the 'otherness', the social hierarchy of man in society establishes the superior standing of one 'group of men' over the 'other' who opposes the norms, or at times of those who are complacent. 'Power relationship' as Okolie (2003, p. 2) puts it is often the notions of superiority and inferiority embedded in particular identities due to the consequences reflected by power differentials. For instance, this event scene visually puts emphasis on the balance of power from dominant visuals of hegemonic masculinity, where power is seemingly exercised naturally rather collectively and individually in the classroom context among young male students. Power, moreover, is exercised through the male gaze. Power relations in terms of dominance also exist among individual hegemonic men. Therefore, hegemonic men, who occupy the upper echelons of the heteronormative-hegemonic society, could also occupy different positions in the hegemonic male hierarchy.

Symbolically, power of the hegemonic male dominance over female is at its dynamics throughout the scene in the construction of masculinity. This is articulated visually through female objectification of the male gaze. She is seen as the object of desire for various men. Hence, visually the demand for female objectification is significant. The presence of a stereotypical femininity can be seen as a catalyst for the performance of hegemonic masculinity. However, it can also be argued that the presence of such femininity does not always spark the performance of heteronormativity. In the case of Mazlee, it can be the opportunity for the rejection of such a hegemonic performance of masculinity.

Conflict, in terms of masculinity, appears to be salient within this scene of *Oh My English!* Arguably, the conflict within the social actions of the five social actors gives way to the assumption of diversity in the social structure among men themselves in society. The group of men who are themselves diversified could "reflect conflict between dominant social norms and efforts for change" (Yang and Leong, 2017). However, the effort for change through "dominant ideas appear to be neutral linked to the assumptions that remain unchallenged" (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). As such, the hegemonic form of masculinity is actively privileged over any other forms in this scene.

The findings of this paper also reveal the assumption of exploitation witnessed through men's traditional distinction in society towards women. Women are likely to be seen as, "seductresses and as initiators" (Wodak and Busch, 2004, p. 115-116) to even teenage males. Thus, symbolically the visual interpretation of the stereotypical behaviour of the young men fawning over Putri may contribute in reinforcing the demands of the status quo that is in favour of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonically, men are privileged to exercise their power over women without any form of resistance. In this scene, resistance is neither present within the classroom community of young students nor the woman who is objectified by men. This gives significance to one type of masculinity and not the others. As such, negative cultural notions exaggerated via the act of collectively performed hegemonic masculinity may assist in the process of marginalisation. Marginalisation might lead further to discrimination not only among men but also society that opposes the norms. However, it is also argued here that the privileging of one form of masculinity does not mean the absolute marginalisation of other forms. Mazlee's detachment from the performance of the normative male gaze is a dissent that ruptures notion of absolute compliance in the culturally acceptable norms of hegemonic masculinity.

## 9. CONCLUSION

At the present time, the notion of masculinity itself, at all levels in the Malaysian society is undergoing subtle changes. This study is timely, especially when young viewers from schools nationwide grapple with gendered notions through the visuals in *Oh My English!* More studies in masculinity in terms of its diverse representations in Malaysian televised shows should be explored. It is hoped that such studies of the media could provide insights into diversity in the notions of masculinity[s] or gender.

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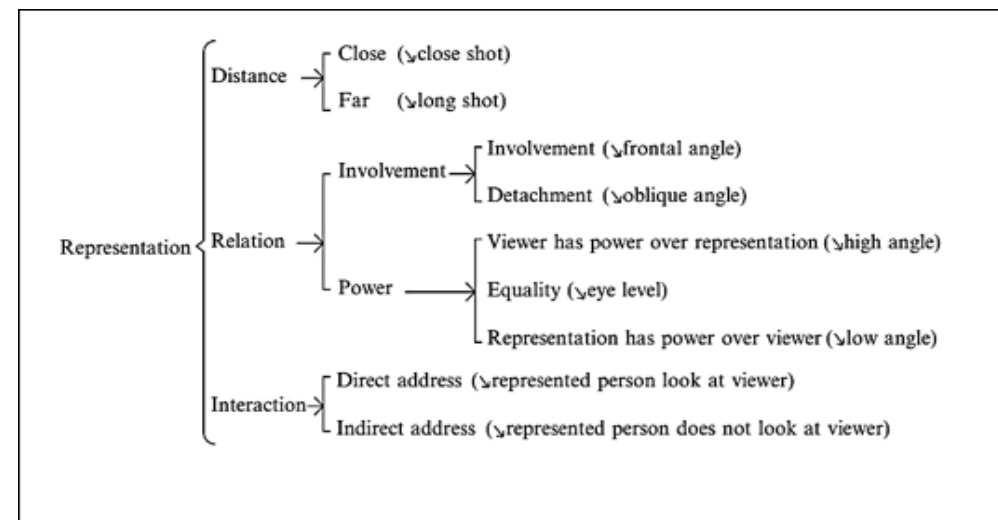
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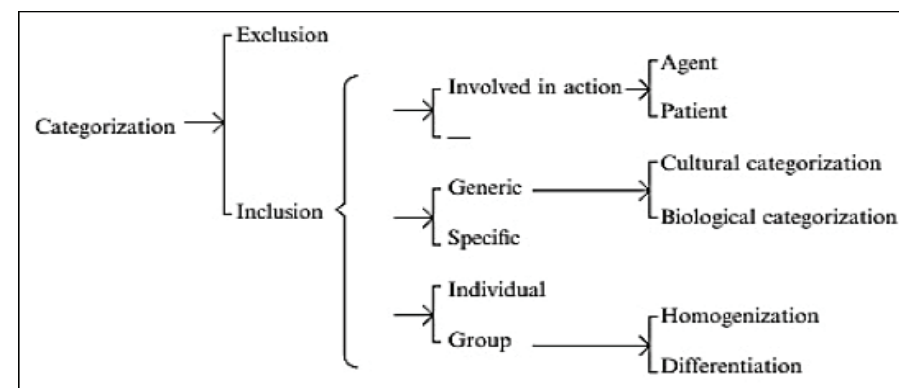
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Appendix 1: Representation and Viewer Network (van Leeuwen, 2008, p.141)



Appendix 2: Visual Social Actor Network (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 147)



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