



**Universiteit  
Leiden**

**FEMINISM IN MALAYSIAN POPULAR CULTURE**



**BY  
THIKUNA CANNA BINTI MOHD SUFFIAN  
1398768**

**UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF  
PROF. DR. BEN ARPS**

**MASTER OF ASIAN STUDIES  
POLITICS, SOCIETY AND ECONOMY OF ASIA**

**LEIDEN UNIVERSITY**

**JULY 2018**

## Table of contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Abstract.....	4
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	
1.1 Introduction and background.....	5
1.2 Significance of the topic.....	6
1.3 Defining the scope.....	7
1.4 Feminist Theory.....	7
1.5 Research question and sub-questions.....	8
CHAPTER 2: THE DIFFERENT EXPRESSIONS OF FEMINISM IN POPULAR CULTURE MEDIA	
2.1 Mass Media.....	10
2.2 Independent Media.....	15
2.3 Celebrity Culture and Expressions of Feminism.....	17
CHAPTER 3: FIVE PHASES, FIVE FEMINISMS	
3.1 Four Phases of Feminism according to Ng et al.....	21
3.2 Entrepreneurial Feminism .....	33
3.3 Case Study I: Thavia The Label: The Feminist Theory Campaign.....	34
3.4 Case Study II: Kind Kones: Unstoppable Women Campaign.....	38
CHAPTER 4: RETHINKING FEMINIST PRACTICES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ETHNICITY AND CLASS	
4.1 Portrayal of Women in Popular culture.....	45
4.2 The Case of Class.....	52
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....	55
REFERENCES.....	58

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Dr. Ben Arps, for his advice and encouragement. Throughout the process he has been very supportive and provided so many constructive suggestions. I am sincerely grateful for his guidance, motivation and for believing in my work.

I would like to thank my parents and siblings for their unconditional support and love. I thank you for always believing in me and being my biggest supporters. I am grateful and proud to be the first of our family to graduate from University. I want to thank my parents for always providing for my siblings and me and telling us that there are no limitations to our dreams, as long as we work hard. I hope I made you proud.

To my significant other, Stefano, thank you for always believing in me and for keeping me company when I was pulling all-nighters. Me studying while you were playing video games all night will be one of my favourite memories ever. Your encouragement and support has been so helpful.

Last but certainly not least; I would like to express my special gratitude to my girlfriends Lexie and the Original 5. In this thesis I extensively wrote about female empowerment, and throughout the process I often reflected on my own life and friendships. I read and wrote about how when strong women come together and lift each other up, amazing things happen. Our sisterhood is living proof of that and I am thankful for that. We always have each other's back and I hope we will continue empowering each other, for amazing things will happen!

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the relationship between feminism and popular culture in Malaysia. It looks at the different media of popular culture and analyses the different expressions of feminism in these media. The evolution of feminism during the different phases is examined and the role of ethnicity and class in understanding the complex and multifaceted movement is evaluated. I argue that there is a growing sense of feminism in popular culture, but that it is restricted to specific popular culture categories-that of independent media- and upper class women. This growing sense of feminism results in entrepreneurialism and individuality among upper class women of primarily Malaysian ethnicity.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction and background

This thesis explores the relationship between feminism and popular culture in a Malaysian context. Popular culture reflects society, and is used as a lens that offers fresh perspectives through which we shape the world around us. Popular culture helps “translate feminist ideology, philosophy and issues into everyday language, making them relevant and relatable” (‘Feminism...signed’). According to Brummet, popular culture “is those artefacts to which most people are exposed, and those artefacts are most actively involved in winning the favor of the public and thus in shaping the public in particular ways (20 and 21). It includes entertainment, film, media, fashion, and celebrity culture among other things.

Feminism refers to any ideology that seeks political, economic, personal and social equality of the sexes. Feminist theory and feminist movements are generally viewed as a Western phenomenon that later exported abroad (Ng 190). Feminism in Asia is for that reasons less well studied than feminism elsewhere. This does not mean, however, that feminism does not exist in Asian countries. This thesis will examine feminism in Malaysia from the post-independence era until today. “Malay ideals of what constitutes a good woman have changed, as has Malay society, which has become more open in many ways” (Lie et al. 36). Malaysian society and its perception of women as well as the role of women economically, politically and socially have changed, as has been the case elsewhere. This thesis will examine to what extent there is a growing sense of feminism in contemporary Malaysia.

## 1.2 Significance of the topic

In recent years popular culture has increasingly acted as a medium through which feminist ideas and beliefs have been disseminated beyond the movement, organizations and activists. Especially in Western popular culture this has been the case. Western artists are increasingly using feminist ideology through their fashion, art, social media, and music. Such a development does not happen accidentally, but is rather a response to other events.

Recently there have been certain developments that show how strongly popular culture and feminism are intertwined. The ‘Me,Too’ movement in the United States and West Europe is such a development that shows how feminism has conquered pop culture. “Celebrities have started to play a new role in a mediated social world that now shapes political action” (Larabee 8).

In the evolution of feminism, it is important to look how exactly it places itself, or is placed, in popular culture, because popular culture reflects and shapes society. If indeed there is a growing sense of feminism in Malaysia, one must look at the changes that take place in popular culture. Are women portrayed differently than before? Is there a sense of agency in these portrayals? And also, in what ways is popular culture itself evolving in a way that is beneficial for transmitting feminist ideology?

All around the world women are using media of popular culture as a platform to express themselves, their art, their values, and their ideologies. This is not only the case in Western society, but certainly also in Malaysian society. Analysing the relationship between feminism and popular culture therefore becomes meaningful. If one wants to truly understand the different phases that feminism has undergone, and the effects it has had on society, one must look at how feminist ideology is manifested in popular culture.

### 1.3 Defining the scope

There is a broad range of literature that focuses on feminism in Malaysia from a post-colonial period until modern days. Most literature is focused on the relationship with Islam and women's organizations. There is literature about its relation to popular culture, however most studies are very specific, focussing on one or two case studies. This thesis will focus on how popular culture has helped translate feminist ideology, issues and concepts into everyday language. It will be limited to a time frame of post-colonial Malaysia until modern day.

### 1.4 Feminist Theory

In Cecilia Ng's book *Positioning Women in Malaysia* (1999) the different variants of feminism and feminist theory are described and analysed. She lists the different types of feminism as liberal, radical, Marxists, socialist, cultural, postmodernist and eco-feminism. Ng points out that "depending on where or who you are, one could be Black, Asian or Third World feminist" (190). She argues that although feminist movements have been most successful in the West, it does not originate in the West, nor is it a Western phenomenon. This thesis will follow the same line of thought. Despite the existence of different types of feminism, feminist theory generally represents one type of view; that of white, middle-class, Western women. In many cases it does not take into account the multi-layered facets of life from women with a non-Western background. This brings me to one of the challenges of this thesis. Feminist theory does not adequately take into account multi-ethnic and multi-cultural facets of female life, and Malaysia is a country that is known for its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society.

This thesis argues that there is no typical 'Malaysian woman', or 'female identity', or 'female struggle'. The same applies to popular culture and its representation of the

‘Malaysian woman’. Given the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural background of Malaysian women, an analysis of how feminism is experienced and expressed must therefore be critical.

Intersectional feminism, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, constitutes a promising theoretical perspective for this issue and for the study of feminism in Malaysia. Crenshaw defines intersectionality as “the view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity”.

In the case of Malaysia, intersectional feminism is meaningful because it “allows for the recognition of diversity among women; gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation constitute major categories of analysis” (Damant et al. 128). The influences of racialization in the analysis of identity, gender, and class need to be fully understood within intersectional theory. This thesis will follow intersectional theory because it allows for a better and more critical analysis, as categories such as social class and ethnicity are considered “to represent not women’s individual characteristics but aspects of women’s social identity” (Damant et al. 129).

### 1.5 Research Question and sub-questions

This thesis aims to answer the following research question: **To what extent is there a growing sense of feminism in Malaysian popular culture?** In doing so, three sub-questions have been formulated that together will answer this question.

The first sub-question, discussed in chapter two of this thesis, is formulated as follows: Through which media is feminism expressed? This question will analyse mass media and independent media and the different expressions and significations of female empowerment.

The second sub-question, discussed in chapter three, is formulated as: How is feminism expressed in popular culture during the different phases of feminism and in what ways is female empowerment stimulated during these phases? The four phases of feminism as identified by Ng et al. will be analysed, followed by one or multiple examples of how feminism has been expressed in popular culture during those phases. A fifth phase that has not yet been discussed in literature will be added.

The third sub-question, discussed in chapter four, will deal with ethnicity and class in the analysis of feminism in popular culture. It is formulated as follows: What role does ethnicity and religion play in the manifestation of feminism in popular culture? Here, representations of women from Malay, Indian and Chinese ethnicity in popular culture will be discussed.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE DIFFERENT EXPRESSIONS OF FEMINISM IN POPULAR CULTURE MEDIA

This chapter aims to analyse the different media through which feminism is expressed in Malaysia. In analysing these different media, a distinction is made between mass media, which is government-controlled, and independent media, where individuals are free of influence of corporate or government interests. It is an important distinction in the discussion of popular culture in Malaysia that therefore will be discussed thoroughly. This chapter will examine the different ways of which feminist ideology, philosophy and issues are expressed in popular culture media.

#### 2.1 Mass Media

Mass media is a medium of communication designed to reach a large audience. It includes all communication, written, spoken or broadcasted that is intended to inform, influence and entertain the public. The different categories of mass media are classified into different groups: print, recordings, cinema, radio, and television. In the discussion of Malaysia's mass media this thesis will limit its analysis to television, newspapers, radio, and cinema as the main mediums of communication.

In Malaysia, most mass media outlets are owned by the government which means that conventional media is controlled. Media outlets are owned directly by the government, owned by component parties of the Barisan National Coalition or owned by individuals with strong political connections. The Media Prima Group is Malaysia's largest and leading media company, owning the majority of TV broadcasters, radio stations, newspapers and production houses. The company is owned by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), one of

the country's largest political parties. An online BBC article concisely describes the relationship between Malaysian mass media and the government:

The authorities exert substantial control over the media and can impose restrictions in the name of national security. State-owned Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) operates two networks. Private stations broadcast in Malay, Tamil, Chinese and English. Private TVs have close ties to the ruling National Front coalition, while state outlets reflect government views. Newspapers must renew their publication licences annually, and the home minister can suspend or revoke publishing permits ('Malaysia profile-Media')

The main reasoning behind the strict control over the media is the desire to protect the Muslim population from what is considered harmful, such as foreign influences or critical political content. As a result, the country is known for having some of the toughest censorship laws in the world. In the discussion of how feminism is expressed in Malaysian popular culture, it is important to take into account these high levels of government control over the mass media. What image of Malaysian women are the authorities trying to portray on the different media of mass media? What is it they want to show the public? How do they want to place women in society? As mentioned before, the discussion of Malaysia's mass media and its expression of feminism is limited here to four mediums of communications. The next part will discuss how women are portrayed in each of these mediums and the different significations of feminism.

#### Television

Yeoh Seng Guan gives a thorough analysis of the Malaysian television landscape in his book *Media, Culture and Society in Malaysia* (2010). He points out that television

broadcasting historically has been “controlled through a combination of ownership and government legislation” (23) and that the Malaysian state has been absolutely instrumental in providing broadcasting policies both for state owned and private stations (24). The first national television stations were RTM 1 and RTM 2 and were introduced in the 1960s. More than twenty years later the first commercial station, TV3 was introduced. These three stations have always been state-owned stations, and Guan gives a detailed overview of how different individuals and (political) organizations have had ownership of Malaysian television stations over the decades. The strong political ties of Malaysia’s television stations resulted in a final acquisition of all commercial free-to-air television to the Media Prima group, which is owned by UMNO. Essentially this means that all commercial television broadcasting is now in the hands of the state, including cultural policies and censorship guidelines. Satellite television, which is provided by ASTRO (All Asia Television and Radio Company) also has strong political ownership ties. The relationship of the state and Malaysian television is extremely essential in the analysis of how feminism is expressed in Malaysian television. Since the Malaysian state imposes cultural and censorship guidelines to all commercial television stations, women are portrayed in a particular way, and images of women are ‘regulated’, to the liking of the Malaysian state. A study of popular Malaysian television dramas by Ibrahim et al. (2017) shows that within mass media, “the stereotypical generalizations of women’s images are still existing but to a lesser degree” (1). This stereotypical image comprises traits such as religious, pious, and dependent on male partners. An important conclusion of this study was that within Malaysian drama series, women are defined as “either perfectly good or absolutely bad or evil” (5). These images of extremes show the complexity of female portrayals on Malaysian television. It seems as if there is no in-between. It should be mentioned however that the selected drama’s also showed some elements of empowerment, such as women “fighting to stand by their own beliefs and values” (5).

## Newspapers

Newspapers in Malaysia can be categorised into three groups: those directed at a Malay audience, a Chinese audience and a more international audience, which includes expats. Print media are published in Malay, English, Mandarin and to a lesser degree Tamil. In recent years the newspaper industry has been criticised for the high levels of censorship. As other mass media, newspapers are state-owned and therefore controlled and regulated. “Malaysia has strict publishing laws that give the government the authority to close newspapers, which advocates of press freedom say puts undue restrictions on critical reporting” (Ramzy 1). In April 2018 the Malaysian government passed an anti fake-news bill, allegedly to eliminate the spread of fake-news. This highly controversial bill has raised more concern about media freedom. In past years, newspapers have been suspended to publish for a period of three months after critical articles about Prime Minister Najib Razak’s corruption scandal. With regard to gender issues, newspapers are usually hesitant to cover stories of oppression, abuse, rape or hardship. Newspapers are usually not the medium where such stories are shared. There are exceptions to the case however. *The Star*, a tabloid-format newspaper has posted articles about feminism and female empowerment. On International Women’s Day in 2015 an article was posted on their website where people were encouraged to join their #IAmAFeminist movement.

## Radio

The majority of the radio stations in Malaysia, 44 in total, are government-owned, against 24 private radio stations. The stations that are state owned operate under the Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) group, one of the biggest public broadcasters. The main language is usually a mix of English and Malay, although some radio stations use Malay, Tamil or Mandarin as their main language, depending on their audience. Female radio hosts are not unusual even though the industry is male dominated, both as hosts and emcees and

production wise. Most radio stations follow an agenda of music, talk and news. Radio as a channel of popular culture is very limited in signifying feminism or female empowerment. The focus simply lies on music, talk and news. There is one private radio station that seems to be the exception to the case however. The Business Station or BFM is Malaysia's only independent radio station and focuses on business events and current affairs. In February 2017 this radio station started a new series on Feminism, focusing on social issues surrounding women in Malaysia, while placing their issues in an international context. The podcast series, named Feminist Fridays, are aired every Friday, hence the name. The duration of the podcasts are around 30 to 40 minutes and every week different women are invited to speak and discuss that week's topic.

#### Cinema

In recent years the Malaysian film industry has been criticised because of the heavy censorship rules imposed by the Malaysian government. Like other mass media, film is heavily controlled and regulated. Ahmad explains that the state essentially wants the film industry to create content that "promotes cultural products and practices which do not question the existing social system" (29). In other words, there is no room for content that is critical of society or politics, let alone gender issues. A study by Zahar and Hussein (2013) points out that feminist issues are barely dealt with in mainstream movies and that the genres are mostly horror, comedy and romantic. Their study shows that as a result of this, the public remains unaware of gender issues.

Cek Cek Molek describes Malaysian media and film having "very patriarchal messages portrayed under the context of a Muslim environment", and she says "Malay movies, television series, novels and stories are always circling around the same patriarchal theme albeit in different settings. The damsels are always in distress and waiting for the same bad

boy who torments them to turn over a new leaf and become their saviour” (‘Cek Mek Molek’).

Feminist issues or ideas are thus exceptional in Malay cinema. What is interesting to note however, is that the Malaysian audience is likely to disagree with this notion. Feminism is not a universal signifying practice, and ideas and beliefs of feminism and female empowerment differ all around the globe. In Malaysian cinema when women are portrayed as pious, obedient Muslims, these characters are considered as good, trustworthy and even role models to women and girls in society. The empowerment of women and girls through Islam is frequently used as an image in Malaysian mass media, especially in television and film.

Within mass media, television and cinema are the two media where expressions of feminism are most visible. These media have the largest audiences and thus the biggest reach. Related to this is the notion that for the Malaysian state these media are the most powerful in conveying images of women to their liking. Malaysian television series are becoming increasingly popular and this is shown by the large number of drama’s shown on television throughout the day. In the next part an analysis will be made of how feminism is expressed in Malaysia’s independent media, focusing on social media. It will further discuss the interesting but complex relationship between notions of female empowerment and Islam in Malaysia.

## 2.2 Independent Media

Independent media refers to all forms of communication that is free of influence of corporate or government interests. In this analysis it is considered the counterpart of mass media. In the discussion of independent media in Malaysia and its expressions of feminist ideology, philosophy and issues, this thesis will limit its analysis to social media. I argue that, of all independent media categories such as television, newspapers, or radio, expressions

of feminism are most strongly identified in social media. Social media is not so much about the technology; instead, it is much more about connections between people. This part will deal with the different ways of which feminist ideology, philosophy and issues are expressed in social media. The platform that will be discussed is Instagram, as I argue that Instagram is most successful in providing a platform of resistance and increasing a woman's ability to challenge normative portrayals of women as conveyed in mass media.

### Instagram

Instagram was launched in October 2010 and has grown to be one of the most popular social networks of the last decade. It is a platform where people can post pictures and videos and connect with their friends. In June 2018 it was estimated that Instagram had reached 1000 million active users ('Number of...millions'). Over the years it has become the ultimate photo-sharing service. It has many different interesting and appealing features, such as filters to edit your pictures with. In addition, Instagram has evolved to be platform where businesses can market their products. It is possible to shop through Instagram. Another interesting aspect of Instagram is the possibility to brand and market yourself as an individual. Many young individuals strive to become what is called 'instafamous', which means that you have a very engaged profile with thousands of followers. These social media 'influencers' can even charge a lot of money for a sponsored post. In this way it is possible for individuals to become a bit of a celebrity on the Internet while making money.

Branding and marketing oneself through Instagram is a worldwide phenomenon. The one thing that is required is access to the Internet. In Malaysia Instagram has become one of the most biggest and successful social media platforms. In 2017 the total Instagram users in Malaysia have been estimated to be around 13.74 million (Faizal Ahmad 1). One of the reasons why Instagram is so successful is because of the influencer-consumers relation. A

consultancy group found that Instagram “users trust what people say online about brands or products more than ‘official ‘ sources, such as newspapers or TV adverts. Younger people are trusting bloggers and peers more than information from brands” (‘Malaysian...surges’).

In the analysis of social media and its portrayal of women and expressions of feminism, this information is crucial. Women in Malaysia are increasingly using Instagram as a platform not only to connect with friends, but also to brand and market themselves and sell their products. Women who have become ‘instafamous’ or ‘influencers’ are mostly from higher social classes. Because social media is free of government interests, there are no restrictions and women are free to post any content they want. For that reason, women choose to portray themselves as strong and independent individuals, who are fashionable, in control, and empowered. They use Instagram to promote their businesses- which are often cosmetic and fashion based. I argue that independent media increases a woman’s ability to challenge normative portrayals of women as conveyed in mass media. Instagram provides a platform of resistance and change in how women are portrayed in Malaysian popular culture.

However, most women choose to be moderate when it comes to vocally expressing their ideas of feminism and feminist ideology. Expressions of radical feminism are very uncommon in Malaysian popular culture, whereas in Western popular culture, extreme ideas of feminist ideology are more accepted.

### 2.3 Celebrity culture and expressions of feminism

In Malaysia, female celebrities in the entertainment and film industry have to be careful when it comes to promoting feminist ideas, as they can only do so via media that are not owned by the media outlets they work for. Social media provides platforms where they can be more vocal about their ideas of feminism, but even then they have to be careful. Contracts can always be terminated if one is considered to be too extreme in her political

ideas. For that reason you will find Malaysian celebrities being relatively moderate when it comes to feminism.

There have been female celebrities that publicly identified themselves as feminists. Entrepreneur Vivy Yusof and actress Neelofa, both very beloved by the Malaysian public, were invited to speak at the Forbes Under 30 Summit in 2017. Regarding what feminism meant to them, Neelofa said the following:

Being a Muslim woman, I really believe in gender equality, in equal pay, freedom of choice and all the opportunities the world has to offer. Because we're all created equal – men, women, children, Muslim, Christian, Asian, American and it's not a race between men and women (Chan 1).

In an interview for Forbes Under 30 Vivy Yusof has said:

I feel like women are supposed to go out there, whatever God gives you, your talents, use them for the good of the world. And still look presentable...being a Muslim and wearing the hijab is empowering, and I want to change the notion of Islam (Thomas 1).

What is striking is that both women, when asked about their ideas of feminism, immediately start talking about the Islam and what it's like to be a Muslim woman. In a country with a Muslim government, it shows just how strongly women's perceptions of feminism and female empowerment are politicized. The extent to which popular culture can influence notions of female empowerment and feminism thus seems limited, given how

politicized popular culture seems to be. It is important to realise, however, that Malaysian perceptions of female empowerment and feminism can be structurally different from our, Western perception of feminist ideology. Arguing from a Western perspective and concluding that popular culture in Malaysia is ineffective in promoting feminist ideas therefore becomes complicated and difficult. Intersectional feminism explains how forces of oppression (sexism, racism etc.) are not the same for all women. Depending on inter alia race, religion and class these forces of oppression can vary. Even though it is impossible to escape one's own bias in such an analysis, intersectional issues such as these are important to be handled carefully and with justice.

To conclude, the different ways in which female empowerment is signified in Malaysian mass media and independent media leads to the notion that there is no one, universal type of feminism in Malaysian popular culture. Ideas of feminism and female empowerment in mass media are demonstrated through images of Muslim women who are romantic, dreamy and often dependent on their male counterpart.

Independent media and more specifically Instagram provide a platform of resistance and change in how women are portrayed in Malaysian popular culture. Even though there is a culture of expressive moderation, independent media increases a woman's ability to challenge normative portrayals of women as conveyed in mass media.

### **CHAPTER 3**

## FIVE PHASES, FIVE FEMINISMS

In feminist literature, a distinction is made between different waves of feminism to describe the ideology, issues and politics of that respective time. The first wave of feminism, a term coined by Martha Lear, began in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in Great Britain and the United States and focused primarily on women's suffrage, the right of women to vote in elections but also on property rights and political. The second wave, also introduced by Martha Lear, began in the 1960s and was centered around issues concerning inequalities in sexuality and reproductive rights. Third wave feminism, a term introduced by Rebecca Walker, began in the 1990s and is characterized by terms like diversity and individualism. The latest wave, fourth wave feminism, began in 2012 and is focused on combatting sexual harassment. Technology and social media are considered essential of this wave. These four waves primarily describe the issues and struggles of women in the Western world and whilst it is true that there is certain universality in these issues, it is also true that non-Western countries have experienced different waves of feminisms.

This chapter will answer the question of how feminism is expressed in popular culture during the different phases of feminism and in what ways female empowerment is stimulated during these phases. The four different phases as identified by Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad and tan beng hui in their book *Feminism and the Women's movement in Malaysia* (2006) will serve as a foundation of which chapter is based. Each phase will be analysed following by a small case study of how feminism has been expressed in popular culture during those phases. A fifth phase of feminism will be added that thus far has not been discussed in academic literature. Here two case studies will be used to examine expressions of feminism and the ways in which female empowerment is stimulated.

The use of the word 'phase' implies that there is a beginning and an end, which, in this case, might be misleading. Instead I argue that the phases of feminism as proposed by Ng et al. can best be understood as streams, that comprises the different ideologies, issues and struggles of that time. The different names of the phases, or streams, really only suggests how the movement is evolving. The five phases as discussed in this chapter must therefore not be seen as singular, but rather as complimentary.

### 3.1 The four phases of feminism according to Ng et al.

In *Feminism and the Women's movement in Malaysia* (2006) Cecilia Ng et al. have described the different phases of feminism in Malaysia. The four feminist phases as identified by these authors are closely related to political moments, or trends. They argue that the "notion of feminism, as well as its trajectories and political motivations, has been extremely fluid" (40). The four phases of feminism are classified as nationalist feminism, social feminism, political feminism and market-driven feminism. In finding the extent to which there is a growing sense of feminism in Malaysian popular culture, their study is crucial as it provides an in-depth analysis of the evolution of feminism in Malaysian society. The four phases as identified by these authors are strongly linked to political moments, historical transitions and phases. Their analysis differs from this thesis' analysis as they provide a more general study on the evolution of feminism and the concept of popular culture is not incorporated at all. They argue that "the feminist agenda has been important enough at every level of history to be incorporated as a statist concern" (40). Whether or not there has been a growing sense of feminism over time is not a question that is answered in their study, rather, they describe how feminism has evolved during the different phases, which actors have been involved, and to which historical and political moments these phases correspond. It must be emphasized that these four phases are fluid and that they can co-exist. The start of one phase

does not necessarily mean the end for another. It would be a mistake to “assume the presence of a single, unitary form of feminism” at any time of Malaysian history (34). The following part will describe the four phases as classified by Ng et al. and will illustrate how feminism was expressed in popular culture in each of these phases.

### Nationalist Feminism

The first phase of feminism was based on and connected to the idea that women were victims of foreign colonisation and an obsolete traditional system (32). Characteristic of this phase was that women were not so much regarded as victims of patriarchy. Formal institutions that were connected to schooling and the legal system were regarded as helpful and essential in the empowerment of women. This first phase of feminism took place during Malaysia’s modern history, that is to say, the period after independence until around 1985. During this phase feminism was mostly expressed in Women’s magazines. These magazines discussed what it was like to be a modern women in Malay society. *Bulan Melayu*, published 1930 until 1941, was one of these women’s magazines. It was an initiative of the Persatuan Guru-Guru Sekolah Melayu dan Sekolah Agama Negeri Johor (Malay Women Teachers Association Johor). This magazine was special not only because it was the first women’s magazine ever, but also because it was more educational than entertaining. The Johor women’s association created *Bulan Melayu* partly as a women’s magazine partly for educational publication and partly as newsletter, a tool for developing, expressing and disseminating their ideas (Doukakis 3). “It was published in Jawi, a form of Malay written in an alphabet primarily derived from Arabic and with strong Islamic links, rather than Rumi, the Romanised Malay” (Doukakis 5). Figure 1 shows a cover from one of the monthly editions from 1931. You can see women engaging in different activities, creating and studying different things. A discussion on how Malaysian identity and Islam are intertwined

can be traced back as far as *Bulan Melayu*. As Malaysia's first women's magazine, their outlook on women's place in society can be considered remarkably progressive. The writers advocated for qualified female Quran teachers and "criticised interpretations of Islam which argued against the schooling for girls which they sought" (Doukakis 6). Instead, they used the Quran to advocate for women's education and rights. Emancipation and empowerment through Islam can thus be traced back as far as the 1930s. During the era of nationalist feminism, the expressions of female empowerment and emancipation are limited to print media. Besides *Bulan Melayu* there were other women's magazines that discussed Malay identity and society. *Ibu Melayu*, *Dewan Perempuan*, *Ibu*, and *Puteri* were the other main magazines for women during this phase. In these years, where the country transitioned from colonialism to independence, these magazines were a platform for women to communicate new ideas about society, identity and religion. The earliest women's magazines focused primarily on nationalism, ideas of liberation and emancipation. Interestingly, fashion and entertainment were included but really came only secondary. Thus, in the first phase of modern feminism, expressions of feminism in print media came in the form of women's magazines. Female empowerment is stimulated through education and Islam.



Figure 1: Bulan Melayu cover 1931

Source:<https://sweeling1995mediaculture.wordpress.com/2015/06/16/roles-of-magazine-and-women-before-independence>

### Social feminism

The second phase of feminism was marked by the foundation of women's organizations. The main focus of these organizations was to make state institutions more effective for women's benefit. Social feminism

aimed to escape the problems brought about by colonialism by modernizing the country through nation-building. This type of feminism was welfaristic in orientation (35). Ng, Mohamad and beng hui categorize this phase from 1958 to 1969. The National Council of Women's Organization (NCWO) was one of the first and most important organizations that worked on a large-scale to empower women and advance gender equality. Until today, NCWO is an umbrella organization that is non-religious, non-political and non-communal. During the era of social feminism, images of feminism are most evident in magazines and film. Where women's magazines arose in the 1930s, the 1960s was marked by an increase of Malay magazines, which included new magazines for women. Where the first women's magazines served as a post-colonial platform to discuss new ideas about society, identity and religion, focussing on nationalism, ideas of liberation and emancipation, the magazines that emerged in the 1960s served a different purpose, that of entertainment. According to Sejarah Wanita, an online archive of Malaysian women's history, the magazines that best represented

this shift in purpose were *Asmara*, *Fashion* and *Aneka Warna*. These magazines made extensive use of Western images of women, fashion, lifestyle and identity.

Figure 2 shows a magazine cover of *Asmara* (date unknown), which clearly shows women presenting themselves in a more sexy way. They are wearing makeup and heels, carrying cute bags and wearing their hair in a pretty updo. In addition, the woman in the middle is wearing a dress that would be considered revealing.



Figure 2: Cover of *Asmara*

<https://sweeling1995mediaculture.wordpress.com/2015/06/17/malay-women-magazine-after-independence/>

The women's magazines of the 1950's 60s marked a shift towards commercially oriented entertaining magazines that focused on beauty, fashion, celebrity culture and lifestyle. During

the phase of social feminism, feminism was thus mostly expressed in popular culture through images of fashion and Western culture. “Malay women’s preoccupations with beautification in this period were characteristic of this time” and the adoption of Western beauty standards such as having fair skin were a way of empowerment. Having a ‘beautiful body’ “became a powerful assets in showing confidence and maintaining sexual attraction in marriage” (Wong 1). It must be mentioned that there was resistance towards this trend among the Malaysian population, especially in the more religious spheres. It was argued that Malay women were losing their identity by embracing Western culture. Nonetheless, the 1950s and 60s are marked by a beautification of women in popular culture, and to many, this was a way of empowerment. It is interesting to note that unlike the first phase of feminism, social feminism and expressions of feminism in popular culture during this era do not really seem to match. Social feminism as discussed in the literature seems to focus on the institutionalisation of women’s rights and issues. Images of feminism and female empowerment in popular culture follow a different trend, that of fashion, beauty and sexuality. In other words, social feminism is not reflected in popular culture. What adds to this notion is the fact that film became increasingly popular in the 1950s and 60s, and as a result of this, celebrity culture started to become an integral part of mass media and popular culture. The female celebrities of the 1950s and 60s followed the trend of beautification and became real fashion icons. It is without a doubt that this helped women feel empowered by the changing ideas of fashion, beauty and lifestyle, because they saw their Idols following the same trends.

### Political feminism

The third phase of feminism occurred from the early 1970s until the late 1990s. During the 1970s Malaysia experienced drastic changes in governing policies due to the New Economic Policy (NEP), a social re-engineering affirmative action program (35). “There was

an emergence of politics centred on identity politics largely because the project for equity was already subsumed under the NEP and framed by an ethnic discourse” (35). Characteristic for this phase was that, unlike the other two phases, ‘patriarchy’ was considered to be origin of gender inequality. As a result, women’s organizations were no longer directed at a larger purpose such as nationalism, modernism or socialism (35). Instead, patriarchy as the root cause of gender inequality became the focal point. Throughout this third phase political feminism became successful in influencing civil society and governance (39). Political feminists played a prominent role during the *Reformasi* politics “in intervening in matters related to laws and enforcement against domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment” (39).

Identity politics became a key issue during these years and this was reflected in popular culture. Women’s magazines such as *Wanita* (literally “women”) were created “to serve as an affordable source of knowledge and entertainment, and to portray the identity of a modern Malaysian woman” (Rahman et al. 66). *Wanita*, created in 1969, is until today one of Malaysia’s leading women’s magazines that is published in Bahasa Malayu. It focuses on fashion, beauty, recipes, health and lifestyle. However, in the early years of *Wanita*, the focus was much more on creating awareness of women’s issues. Articles were written with strong feminist voices that advocated for women’s rights. “Women were shown in the roles and positions they played in developing the country, which reflects that the purpose of *Wanita*, in its early years of publication, was to provide awareness about women's rights in the context of the young nation” (Rahman et al. 69). Here, feminism was expressed in the discussion on women’s roles in nation building. The question of what roles women should take on to facilitate Malaysia’s growth as a nation was central.

The ideas of political feminism were, however, not always reflected in popular culture. Unlike *Wanita*, where the discussion of identity and nation-building were fundamentally linked to notions of feminism and female empowerment, in other media of

popular culture feminism was not so evident. In Malaysian soaps and dramas strong stereotypical generalizations of women's images were being used. Women were portrayed in the roles of gossiping, complaining wives and sex objects. "The local Malay soaps were usually quite simplistic both in terms of plot and characterization: they generally promoted the idea that any problem can be solved by returning to the Islamic religion" (Arrifin 84).

Another interesting development in the era of political feminism is the rise of girl bands. The 1990s is marked by the establishment of several female pop groups such as Feminin, Elite, M'steen, Res2. The rise of girl bands in the 1990s was a global trend that was not limited to the Western music industry only. The Spice Girls, TLC, En Vogue and Destiny's Child are only a few examples of major Western girl bands that influenced music industries elsewhere. The Malaysian girl bands of the 1990s show how Western culture is embraced and adopted. There are unmistakable Western influences in clothing style, dance and music. During the 90s the idea of 'girl power' was embraced in the music industry, not only in the Western world, but definitely also in Malaysia. Feminism and female empowerment was expressed not so much in the lyrics of the songs or the visuals, but much more in terms of personal female autonomy and the freedom to express oneself. It would be an overstatement to say that the rise of these girl bands were very political, however, it does show a certain resistance to traditional Malaysian culture.

Compared to feminist expressions in the Western music industry, the Malaysian girl bands were much more modest when it came to messages of emancipation and empowerment. These girls were portrayed as cute and charming and their music did not discuss strong feminist themes such as patriarchy, female sexuality or sexual freedom. However, the rise of these female pop groups itself and their popularity shows that feminism and ideas of female empowerment started to penetrate into public life and discourse.

To sum up, the era of political feminism lasted for about twenty years. Expressions of feminism in popular culture during this phase are divergent, partly because of the long duration of this phase but also because the different media of popular culture as discussed- print media, television and music- were subject to different levels of freedom. Women's magazine *Wanita* is until today published by *Utusan Melayu*, which is indirectly owned by the Malaysian government. The strong feminist voice of *Wanita* in the early years of publication is probably due to a combination of loose government regulations and the personal commitment of Chief Sub-Editor Nik Rahimah Hassan in offering new perspectives and narratives on feminism. In Malaysian television an ideology of stereotypical gender generalization is followed which results in notions of feminism not being evident. Malaysian television broadcasters are historically government owned, as explained earlier. The girl bands were signed by independent record labels and music publisher, which explains their expressions of female empowerment. It is hard to provide a unitary answer to the question to how feminism was expressed in popular culture during the phase of political feminism as different approaches towards feminism can be identified. In some media of popular culture, such as television, there are no expressions of feminism at all. Other media, like print media or music, did produce progressive and empowering notions of feminism. Discussions on the role of women in nation building and the embracement of Western culture regarding beliefs of female autonomy stimulated female empowerment.

#### Market –driven feminism

The fourth phase of feminism started around 1990 as female participation in the job market started to increase. More expenditure in education resulted in a growing number of educated females. Because of this, women started to have greater consumer power. "Enterprises responded to this development by organizing many consumer-oriented activities

for women, presumably for their personal development” (38). During this period, feminism started to become a lucrative business. At the root of market-driven feminism lies a capitalist drive for profit, and it is for that reason that market-driven feminism is not always perceived positively. A study by Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires (2012) defines market feminism as something that “seeks to promote gender equality by turning to the media and mechanisms offered by the market” (390) “Market feminism might be read as a reformulation of feminist agenda and as providing new forms of political engagement” (395). Market-driven feminism therefore does not necessarily mean that feminism as an ideology is used for the sole purpose of making money. It is a way for feminism to enter public life and discourse through the market.

Market feminism is regarded as the fourth and latest phase or wave of feminism that “focuses less on dismantling systems, and more on the prepackaged feel good message of self-empowerment” (Nguyen 1). Market feminism does however promote capitalist marketing and uses feminism to create new markets and sell more products. This phenomenon can be seen worldwide. Big international corporations like H&M and Nike have launched campaigns in the previous years using feminist images and ideology. These campaigns were fully dedicated to empowering women, spreading a feel-good message and to celebrate the variety of womanhood. Market-driven feminism is thus characterised by state-managed capitalism allowing corporations to use the media and mechanisms offered by the market to reach women.

Expressions of feminism and female empowerment in popular culture during this phase are very scarce. Advertisements, magazines and television maintain stereotypical and sexist portrayals of women. “In most advertisements, men are often portrayed as smart, intelligent, technologically advanced and knowledgeable as opposed to women, who are often depicted as mothers who are extremely happy doing housework or females who are

obsessed with nothing but their physical appearance” (Loone 1). Interestingly, the advertisement industry is dominated by women and is one of the few professions with extremely low numbers of gender discrimination (bin Abd. Rahim et al. 67). In recent years there has been much criticism on how women are portrayed in advertisements and the messages that are conveyed. In 2017, an advertisement by skin whitener Slimme White sparked outrage among Malaysian people as it suggested that having lighter and fairer skin would stop domestic abuse (Michael 1).

Foreign based magazines such as *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Women’s Weekly* and *Cleo* have become significant components in Malaysian print media during this phase. These English magazines are reinforcing traditional roles of women and are increasingly focusing on materialistic values. Articles and advertisements are devoted to female appearance and physical beautification and topics such as how to be a good wife are abundant. One can argue that in doing so, femininity is exploited and misogynistic beauty standards are perpetuated. Magazines that are published in Bahasa Malayu, such as *Wanita* and *Glam*, follow the same trend. As discussed earlier, *Wanita* used to have strong feminist content in the early years of publication but there is no clear continuation of this.

The portrayal of women in television dramas also does not show any progressive forms of feminism or female empowerment. Just like television during the era of political feminism, women are continuously portrayed in the roles of gossiping, dependent and materialistic wives. Solving problems by returning to Islam is also continuously depicted in television dramas.

The trends as reflected in popular culture since the 1960s are beautification of women, embracing Western beauty and fashion standards, and stereotyping gender roles. Although these trends were by some women experienced as empowering and liberalised, the agency that women are exercising is questionable. Why are women dressing in a particular way?

Why are women wearing makeup? Why has bleaching ones skin become normal? Why are women embracing Western beauty standards? The answer could be simple; for ones own fulfilment. However, it is questionable whether women are aware that their “fulfilment is shaped by the oppressive beauty standards perpetuated by men. A women’s choice to dress or act a particular way “could be a by-product of patriarchal influences that she is not consciously aware of” (Mokhsein 1). Even though there are many examples of expressions of feminism and notions of female empowerment in popular culture, at the same time popular culture has a way to “construct a mindset in which women find fulfilment, satisfaction and happiness from fulfilling the exact roles that men want them to.” Even though these choices are not coerced, it questions a woman’s agency (Mokhsein 1).

To sum up, expressions of feminism in popular culture during the phase of market-driven feminism are scarce. The trends that arose during the 1960s such as beautification of women and the embracement of Western beauty standards, which, at that time, produced empowering notions of feminism, are continued in this phase. But during the years of political feminism, these trends were related to ideas of personal female autonomy and the freedom to express oneself through fashion, beauty and music. In addition, the discussion of identity and nation building were fundamentally linked to notions of feminism and female empowerment. Considering the time between these two phases and all the developments Malaysian society was exposed to in these decades, the fact that these trends were persevered and even aggravated up shows that no progress has been made regarding notions of feminism. In other words, since the late 1990s there has been no further evolvement of feminism in popular culture. The next part will discuss how the concept of agency is crucial in bringing about change

### 3.2 Entrepreneurial feminism

In the case of Malaysia, I argue that there is a fifth phase of feminism that has not yet been identified or discussed in academic literature. 'Entrepreneurial feminism', as called here, is a phase of feminism that is centered around female entrepreneurship and individuals.

To a certain degree entrepreneurial feminism is a continuation of market-driven feminism, as both are characterized by the promotion of capitalist marketing and the use of feminism to create new markets and sell more products. The main difference is that market-driven feminism is focused on corporations that use the media and mechanisms offered by the market to reach women whereas entrepreneurial feminism is centred on female entrepreneurship as a way of empowering women. Agency, the ability and freedom for female entrepreneurs to make choices, is crucial in this phase. Entrepreneurial feminism is inherently linked to female individuals who are starting their own businesses and therefore create a state of independence. This in turn, creates artistic and financial freedom.

These female entrepreneurs are often well educated, have studied abroad, speak English as their mother tongue, are masters in using social media to their benefit, and are from upper-class families. Most of their businesses focus on the beauty and fashion industry, from local cosmetic companies to international fashion brands. What is interesting here is that these female business owners present themselves and their products in a very innovative way. The use of social media is absolutely crucial not only in bringing their products to the market, but also to present themselves in such a way that they come across as empowering, strong and independent. In other words, social media has become a strategic way to not only market a product, but also to market a person. For many women this has paid off, as their engagement with the media resulted in them becoming (semi) famous. The opportunities to be a 'self-made woman' are plentiful in this phase of feminism. Showing that you are a 'self-made woman' via (social) media through images, texts, and visuals is in itself an

expression of feminism. Ideas of female empowerment are shared through the content that is shared on (social) media. Apart from that, the actual products that female entrepreneurs bring to the market also have messages of female empowerment, sometimes even literally.

T-shirts with feminist slogans seem to really have been a trend in the past years. International brands like Topshop, H&M, Nordstrom, Urban Outfitters and Mango have all had t-shirts in their collections with feminist slogans such as: Femme Forever, Femme Vibe, Femme Liberte, Yes I'm A Feminist, The Future Is Female or simply Feminist. Even Dior had a We Should All Be Feminist t-shirt in their 2017 spring collection, which as a result, a lot of celebrities started to wear and were even featured in it in major magazine covers. These t-shirts all pretty much look the same: white, simple, with the slogan in black capital letters. It is interesting to note that such trends do not seem to be bound by class, race or even geography. This kind of feminist activism is also increasingly seen in Malaysia.

The next part will analyse how feminism is expressed in popular culture during this phase by looking at two case studies. It will look at how Thavia, an international fashion brand, and Kind Kones, a vegan ice cream shop, are using feminist ideology in their campaigns.

### 3.3 Case Study I: Thavia The Label: The Feminist Theory Campaign

Thavia the Label is a Kuala Lumpur based fashion brand that was established in 2015. Thavia has a contemporary approach to classic styles and focuses on detailed driven classics and statement pieces. In May 2017 Thavia launched the Feminist Theory collection. Figure 3 and 4 show some of pieces from this collection. The creative director and co-founder, Tengku Chanela Jamidah, is a well-known fashion influencer and entrepreneur. She has described the Feminist Theory collection as follows:

To bring this collection to life, we have chosen to go with a soft array of muted hues such as blue, blush and tan as our colour scheme. A ruffles theme was introduced as a feminine aesthetic along with subtle details like suede, the continuity of our eyelet and lace up detailing to give the collection structure and reflect our identity. The Ruffles play is also significant as its ornamental wave effect, representing the highs and lows of what women experience throughout their lives all for the advancement of their gender and future generations ('Thavia Kuala Lumpur').

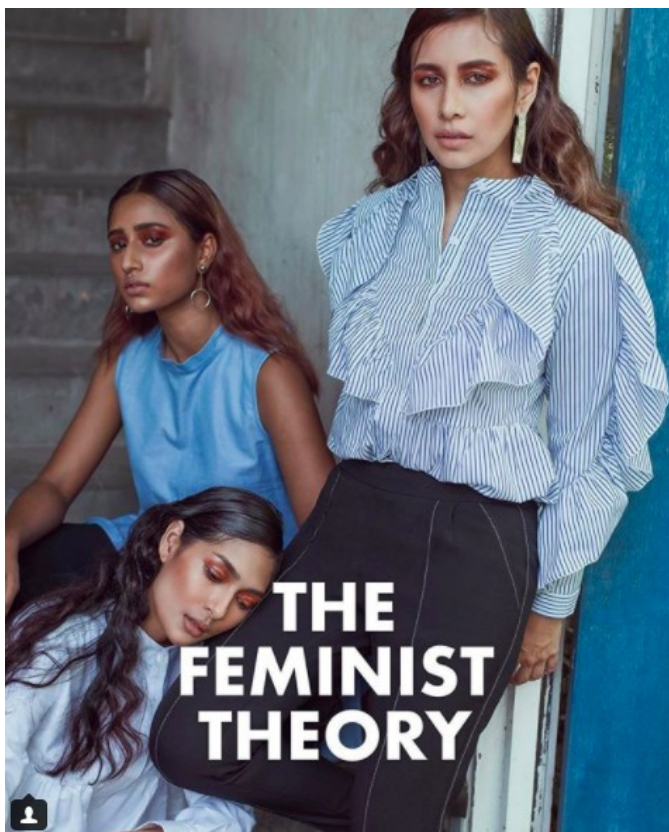


Figure 3 and 4: Official pictures from the Feminist Theory Campaign showing some of the pieces from the collection.

Thavia is using media of popular culture to express ideas of feminism and share notions of female empowerment. The campaigns, the advertisements, the use of influencers,

and the use of imagery and texts via social media are both characteristic and innovative ways in which popular culture is used to share ideas of feminism.

To promote The Feminist Theory campaign, different events were organized where women came together to celebrate womanhood, female empowerment, entrepreneurship, friendship and also fashion. Tengku Chanela Jamidah herself invited her close friends, who in many cases also happened to be female entrepreneurs, for an exclusive preview of the collection before it went live. In May 2017, I was lucky enough to be attending one of these events myself as the assistant of one of her close friends, Didie Nasir, with whom she owns Dida For Women, a local cosmetics company. It was impressive and interesting to see different women from different backgrounds coming together to celebrate female empowerment. They had lunch together, spoke about feminism and what it meant to be female entrepreneurs, and took a lot of pictures that were posted on social media. In July 2017 Thavia launched ThaviaProjects, an initiative that recognises, supports and builds creatives and artisans in Malaysia. Under this initiative The Feminist Theory Project was introduced, where ten feminist personalities were shot in Thavia's Feminist statement t-shirt.

The Feminist Theory is a clear example of how feminism is commercialized and branded. Although there are capitalist purposes to it, Thavia claims that it aims to empower and celebrate women with this collection. However, an important question that needs to be asked here is; to what extent is there a political substance to the collection or the thinking behind it? Is it merely packaging, or is there an actual feminist, theoretical element to the campaign?

I argue that the rationale behind this campaign actually does have political components. Thavia is a successful fashion brand that is recognized internationally, that has created artistic freedom, and is run by upper-class women only. The campaign therefore is bigger than the fashion itself. Indeed, it does sell t-shirts with 'Feminist', but this campaign

seems to be reaching for something bigger than that. By involving different successful and strong women and spreading their stories on social media, Thavia seems to be selling feminism as an ideology as well, other than using it for capitalist purposes. It tries to convey a message that women can be independent, can be entrepreneurs, can follow their own path and can be fashionable, all at the same time. Thavia, like many other brands, is using influencer marketing to reach its target goal. An (online) influencer is “an individual who has the power to affect purchase decisions of others because of his/her authority, knowledge, position or relationship with his/her audience” (‘What is an influencer?’). This type of marketing is characteristic of today’s social media and online web-shops. As of now, Yaya Zahir is promoting Thavia’s latest collection, the Real Estate.

The question here is, what is Thavia’s influence on feminism and female empowerment, and does such a collection truly contribute to a rising sense of feminism in Malaysia? On the one hand, it makes feminist fashion items accessible to the public, and in that way women or girls can feel empowered when wearing these items. Having such a collection potentially contributes to making feminist ideas accepted. Thavia ships internationally so Malaysian women or girls that live abroad are able to buy and wear items from the Feminist Theory collection. The fact that Thavia is using social media in their marketing strategies can definitely serve as an effective and powerful tool for spreading feminist ideas. It is estimated that in 2016 68.8 % of Malaysia’s population had access to the Internet (Internet Live Stats). A study by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) (2016) shows that 80% of the Internet users visit social media sites and that an Internet user spends about four hours a day on social media sites (‘INTERNET USERS SURVEY 2017 8). Considering the amount of Instagram followers Thavia (26.1000) and Tengku Chanela Jamida (120.000) have, promoting feminist ideas via social media can potentially be effective. Combined with the hundreds of thousands or even millions of

followers of other influencers that promote Thavia's items, such as Vivy Yusof (1,4 million) or Yaya Zahir (123.000) social media has an enormous reach.

On the other hand, Thavia's influence might be limited to certain social spheres and classes. Thavia's target audience are middle to upper class women. Its items are not necessarily extremely expensive, but probably too expensive for most. To give an idea, the items are priced ranging from 150MYR to 470MYR. The average monthly wage has been calculated to be 1703 (median) 2463 (mean) MYR in 2016. In other words, Thavia is a relatively expensive fashion label that is mostly focused on middle to upper class women. Also, Thavia is Kuala Lumpur centred, not only in terms of physical stores where the items can be purchased, but also in terms of events. So, although its reach on social media is enormous, other than that it is very Kuala Lumpur focused. However, given the popularity of certain influencers such as Tengku Chanela Jamidah herself, combined with the high usage numbers of social media in Malaysia, Thavia the Label definitely has the potential to spread feminist ideas amongst women and girls in Malaysia. Because social media is a free and independent platform, there are virtually no restrictions or limitations for women to express themselves. Ideas and beliefs of feminism and messages of female empowerment can thus be shared freely, since there is no government regulation.

### 3.4 Case Study II: Kind Kones: Unstoppable Women Campaign

In February 2017 Kind Kones was established. They produce and sell chemical-free vegan ice cream in five of the biggest shopping malls around Kuala Lumpur. They also sell wraps, sandwiches and desserts, but they are mostly known for their freshly house made, dairy-free and refined sugar-free ice cream. On January 10 2018, so weeks before their first anniversary, Kind Kones launched the 'Unstoppable Women' campaign. During this seven-month campaign they collaborate with nine women "through a creative giveback

initiative that reminds their communities what it means to be kind to your body, the environment, and to others” (Kind Kones, Instagram). These nine women get to personalise their own ice cream flavour, and the proceeds for each sale will be donated to their preferred charity. Each month Kind Kones will highlight the story of one woman and her chosen charity on its Instagram page. Figure 5, 7 and 8 show pictures of events that were held in celebration of this campaign. Note how some women are wearing t-shirts with feminist slogans, and in that way are reinforcing the idea of female empowerment through this campaign.



Figure 6: Unstoppable Women event. Found on Kind Kones' Instagram account



Figure 7 and 8: Unstoppable Women event. Found on Kind Kones' Instagram account

. The women included in this campaign are:

- ◆ Deborah Henry - Co-founder of Fugee School, children's rights advocate, & Miss Malaysia
- ◆ Datuk Nicol David - Professional squash player, 8-time world champion, & world #1 for a record-breaking 9 consecutive years
- ◆ Nadia Nasimuddin - F&B mogul, entrepreneur, working mother
- ◆ Ung Yiu Lin - Fashion Icon, entrepreneur, designer, & working mother
- ◆ Tengku Chanela Jamidah - Fashion entrepreneur, style icon, & working mother
- ◆ Davina Goh - Plant-based lifestyle advocate & vegan warrior
- ◆ Jesrina Arshad, Stephanie Looi, & Marissa Parry – Entrepreneurs, working mothers, & founders of Purely B, Asia's leading digital wellness platform

According to Kind Kones these women “are paving the way for extraordinary change in Malaysia as well as beyond its borders” (Kind Kones, Instagram). Compared to the first case study this is an interesting case because where fashion and feminism have co-existed for a long time, the intersection of food and feminism seems a little blurry. There is literature however that deals with food production and eating from different feminist research perspectives. Feminist Food Studies is an existing discipline that deals with “the study of

food, cooking, and eating linked to include sociology, history, philosophy, economics, and the interdisciplinary fields of Women's Studies, American Studies and Cultural Studies" (Avakian and Haber 1). Following Feminist Food Studies, eating, "due to its sensual, visceral nature – is a strategic place from which to begin to understand identity, difference and power" (A. Hayes-Conroy and J. Hayes-Conroy 462). Questions such as: "who can afford food (economic inequality), who prepares the meals (gender inequality), what counts as quality, who controls knowledge about food, and how are power hierarchies in food chains reinforced" are discussed in this discipline (A. Hayes-Conroy and J. Hayes-Conroy 462).

In the analysis of Kind Kones' campaign with regard to promoting female empowerment and feminism, it is important to see what the literature makes of such collaborations and campaigns. Maja Novajociv (2014) asserts that food advertising and food campaigns that aim to empower women actually empowers and frightens women at the same time. In many cases, the "individualized notion of personal responsibility for health" is sold (656). She argues that campaigns often create a false sense of urgency and empowerment because they are responding to emotions of fear (to miss out on something) and insecurity.

In the case of KindKone's campaign, I argue that the main rationale of this campaign is to raise brand awareness. They were established only a year and a half ago so this campaign and its use of social media would enable them to promote their products in a very efficient way. Empowerment sells and Kind Kones smartly plays into this. There is therefore no real political, feminist, substance to the Unstoppable Women campaign; it is merely packaging and transmitting a feel good message. However, it would be an overstatement to argue that that the Unstoppable Women campaign is creating a false sense of empowerment, as it is relatively a very small-scaled campaign with a small reach.

This doesn't mean that Kind Kones isn't innovatively using popular culture to express ideas of feminism and beliefs of female empowerment. The Unstoppable Women Campaign,

the use of influencers/ambassadors, and the imagery and texts that are shared via social media are ways of expressing feminist ideas via popular culture. Again, the question here is, what influence does Kind Kones' campaign have on feminism and female empowerment? Kind Kones only has five physical stores around the Kuala Lumpur area so in spreading their message they rely on their social media accounts. Currently they have 4459 followers on Instagram, which makes them social media wise speaking— a newbie. The nine women that are included in this campaign however collectively have about 500.000 followers on Instagram. Considering that these women all promote this campaign on their social media media, its reach suddenly becomes huge. Thus, regarding its reach, Kind Kones relies on the reposts that these women make regarding the Unstoppable Women Campaign. Also, considering this campaign being very local and small scaled, its impact or effects regarding spreading feminist ideas will be limited, both geographically and socially. Kind Kones was established only one year ago, and given that they are very Kuala Lumpur centred, it is likely that not too many people will have heard of this campaign, and the ones that have, will be centred around Kuala Lumpur. Also, Kind Kones is relatively expensive. One scoop of ice cream costs 9.90 RM and a double scoop costs 17.50 RM. In comparison, the cheapest ice cream you can buy in a 7-Eleven is only 1 RM. This implies that Kind Kones' customers will mostly be middle to upper class people. However, such initiatives, how small or big, will help normalize commercialized feminism. The Unstoppable Women campaign might be small scaled but it definitely is a good effort of female empowerment. Kind Kones is using the power and reach of social media to its benefit and in that way sets an example of how a small-scale initiative can still be efficient.

The two case studies illustrate the different ways of how feminism is expressed in popular culture during the phase of entrepreneurial feminism. The rationale behind

campaigns can have political and feminist components, as is shown in the Thavia case study, but does not necessarily have to, as the Kind Kones campaign shows. There are several factors that determine whether feminist campaigns are influential in spreading feminist ideas round Malaysia, but I argue that all campaigns of the like help normalize notions of female empowerment, regardless of size. Initiatives where female empowerment is central will become more accepted in this way. Sometimes small actions can be truly powerful in bringing change.

To conclude, this chapter has analysed the different phases of feminism as identified by Ng et al. and the expressions of feminism in popular culture during these phases. Throughout the different phases Malaysian women experienced senses of empowerment through various things; education and Islam in the first phase, sexuality, beauty and fashion in the second phase, embracement of Western culture in the third phase and consumerism in the fourth phase. The fifth phase, entrepreneurial feminism, is centred on female entrepreneurship as a way of empowering women. The female individual who promotes herself and her products through social media is a focal point of this phase. The two case studies illustrate the different ways of how feminism is expressed in popular culture during this phase.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RETHINKING FEMINIST PRACTICES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ETHNICITY AND CLASS**

Malaysia is known for its diversity of religions, ethnic groups and cultures. The Malaysian populations can be divided up into three main ethnic groups: the (Muslim) Malay,

Chinese and Indian. These three ethnic groups are culturally very different and for that reason it is very plausible that their ideas of women and the way these cultures place women in society and family are very different. This chapter will examine representations of Malay, Indian and Chinese girls and women in popular culture and will analyse whether ideas of feminism and female empowerment differ among these groups. In doing so, it will look at how women from these three ethnic groups are represented in mass media, which will be compared to how they are represented in independent media. The role of ethnicity in the manifestation of feminism in popular culture is very important, and is something that has not been given enough attention in the study of feminism in Malaysia. Most studies focus on Muslim feminism, and the representation of Malay women and girls. The experiences of Indian and Chinese women are severely underrepresented in scholarly work, which essentially means that academic work about feminism in Malaysia is incomplete. As a result of this, it is difficult to say anything conclusive in this chapter about feminist beliefs from the Indian and Chinese side, as there is simply not enough academic work for it to be based on. Alternatively, more general statements about how women are placed in Indian and Chinese culture and the portrayal of women from these ethnicities in Malaysian popular culture will be made.

Another question that is asked in this chapter is whether social spheres and class influence one's perspective of female empowerment and feminism. The socialites of Kuala Lumpur will almost definitely have a different view of what female empowerment means compared to conservative women from the North. These are matters that are essential in the analysis of feminism in Malaysia. If this thesis finds that there is a growing sense of feminism, the next question that needs to be answered is: where? Is it within the Malay, Chinese or Indian community? Is it within certain social spheres or classes? This chapter

aims to answer these questions by linking ethnic and socio-economic factors and see how it unfolds in the story of feminism in Malaysia.

#### 4.1 Portrayal of women in popular culture

##### Malaysian women

In *Growing Up Female in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia* (2014) by Cynthia Joseph the different social and cultural forces in identity formation are discussed. For Malay girls and women, the identity signifiers that are seen in popular culture are usually of ethno-religious origin. For example, images of women wearing a tudung (headscarf) and baju kurung (traditional Malay clothing), having limited interaction with boys, praying, fasting and being obedient to elderly are common in mass media's popular culture. As discussed in chapter one, the Malaysian state imposes cultural and censorship guidelines to all commercial television stations, and as a result of that, women are portrayed in a particular, regulated way. Within mass media, stereotypical generalizations of women's images are still upheld.

In mass media's popular culture, ideas of feminism and female empowerment among the Malay Muslim girls and women are often religious based. Malay identity and Islam are very strongly intertwined, as explained in chapter one, which is depicted in popular culture. For example, television dramas and advertisements show images of women solving their problems by returning to Islam, and finding strength, confidence and self-respect in their religion. This is most strongly the case for mass media, but to some extent also applies to independent media. What is interesting here, is that empowerment through Islam is mostly experienced by girls and women from lower classes. Women from higher classes have different ways of empowering themselves, through entrepreneurship, fashion, and individuality. The case of class will be discussed further in this chapter.

Portrayal of women in independent media is quite different compared to mass media. As explained in chapter one, social media such as Instagram and Youtube allow women to express themselves more freely and strongly. Within independent media, women have the freedom to portray themselves in any way they want. Because social media is a free and independent platform, there are virtually no restrictions or limitations for women to express themselves. Ideas and beliefs of feminism and messages of female empowerment can thus be shared freely, since there is no government regulation. As a result, Malay Muslim women are usually portrayed as strong, independent, creative, with a can-do-all mentality. As chapter two explained, independent media shows images of entrepreneurialism and individuality that are transmitted to the public as messages of female empowerment and feminism. This is an important development in the evolution of feminism in Malaysia

Indian women

In Malaysia, most people of Indian origin are Tamils and follow Hinduism. Joseph explains that for that reason, “there exist a dominant culture and religious discourse of Tamilness and Hinduism” (68). Within their communities, Indian women are regarded as the “symbolic bearers of ethnic identity and honour” (68). There is an existing patriarchal ideology that places Indian women belonging “in the home and men in the external world” (69). The traditional discourse of Indian gender roles are reinforced by Hindu teachings, which are followed by most Malaysian Indians. Girls are taught to fit the description of a traditional Indian girl. This means they have to wear long hair, take care of the family’s honour, behave properly, dress properly and study hard. Indian women are constructed as carers and nurturers within the discourse of Tamilness and Hinduism. But how are Indian women constructed and portrayed in Malaysian popular culture?

It is important to note that most Indian people in Malaysia watch, read and follow popular culture media that are targeted at the Indian population. A study by Amira Firdaus

(2006) shows that there is only a small percentage of Indian people that watch Malay television, or read Malay newspapers. This suggests that the Indian population in Malaysia is more attracted to media that are broadcasted in Tamil, Telugu or Malayalam. A study by Ghani and Ali Haidzir (2014) confirms this, as they point out that ethnics in Malaysia, whether Malay, Indian or Chinese, generally prefer media of their respective mother tongue (63). As for television, Astro provides several media that are targeted at the Indian population. Astro Vanaavil, Astro Ulagam and Astro Vinmeen are examples of such media.

In the analysis of popular culture in Malaysia, one should be very critical in assessing whether or not to count these media in, as the programs that are broadcasted on such media are produced outside of Malaysia. In other words, does the way Indian women and girls are portrayed in these programs, and the signification of female empowerment and feminist ideology that comes forth of these programs, really say anything about Malaysian popular culture? Or does it belong to Indian popular culture? Just because something is broadcasted in Malaysia, does it mean it belongs to Malaysian popular culture? Or is something required to be produced in Malaysia as well? I argue that even though there is a fine line, Malaysian popular culture and Indian popular culture do not exclude each other in this sense, but instead, are to some regards complimentary. Gender relations in the Malaysian Indian community are influenced by the way Indian women are portrayed in Malaysian popular culture, but arguably even more so by Indian popular culture. The main difference is the lack of agency when it comes to the programs or shows that are produced in India. Here, Malaysian Indian women do not have the ability to shape the portrayal-or images- of women whereas in shows that are produced in Malaysia they have- theoretically.

Thus, in the analysis of the representation of Indian women in Malaysian popular culture, it is necessary to look at the way women are portrayed in both Malaysian and Indian popular culture. A study by Rehman shows that from the 1960s on, there have been some

changes in the depiction of female characters in Indian cinema. They have become working women, who attended college and who are running their own businesses (169). In addition, if they are wronged, they themselves will seek revenge, instead of their male counterparts (169). However, even though female characters have become more assertive and dominant, Rehman argues, “when tradition calls, these women still turn into compliant and altruistic mothers, daughters, and wives” (169).

Malay popular culture, here meaning produced and broadcasted in Malaysia, has a way of putting the Malay culture in a dominant position and marginalizing ethnic minorities like the Indian or Chinese. In television and cinema, Indian people are often portrayed in stereotyped roles. Men are depicted as gangsters or labourers, and women are often portrayed in traditional roles. In mainstream media there is a severe underrepresentation of Indian women and girls, but in other categories of popular culture –those belonging to independent media- we do see an increase of Indian females stepping up their game. In the last decade there has been an increase of beauty pageants that are especially created for Indian girls. The Miss Malaysia Indian Global pageant is one example of a race-based pageant that is designed for girls of Indian ethnicity. For them, partaking in a beauty pageant is a way of empowering themselves. It started when Deborah Priya Henry, an Indian-Irish mixed woman participated in the Miss World beauty pageant in 2007 and ended up in the top 16, which was a major achievement. This has paved the way for Indian girls to feel empowered through these race-based pageants because for them, it’s a way to celebrate their femininity and heritage at the same time. Coming from an ethnic minority, Indian women have to deal with racism and discrimination. Race-based beauty pageants are a way of showing the Malaysian society that they are proud of their heritage, and that they can be beautiful too.

Like other women in Malaysia, Indian millennial’s are increasingly using social media as a platform for self-expression. Especially on Instagram one will find Malaysian Indian

girls proudly wearing sari's and sharing pictures of their outfits of the day (using hashtag #OOTD). It is interesting to note that most of these women who have an engaged Instagram account are from upper class families. Later in this chapter the difference in ideas and expressions of feminism among different classes will be discussed more detailed.

### Chinese women

Like the Indian population in Malaysia, the Chinese ethnic minority follows a pattern of watching and listening to media of their mother tongue. In the analysis of the portrayal of Chinese women and girls in Malaysian popular culture and their beliefs and ideas of feminism, it is important to look at Chinese popular culture and its representations of women. As discussed in the previous section, gender relations and understandings of feminist ideology among the non-Malaysian ethnic population is best to be understood if looked at their respective popular culture and its demonstrations of feminism.

Conventional media in China is under the control of the Chinese government, and like in Malaysia, mass media is used as a tool to educate and control society. Several studies point out that women are generally portrayed in stereotypical roles in Chinese popular culture. A study by Feng and Karan (2011) of Chinese women's magazines shows that "women's magazines tend to reinforce traditional sex role stereotypes, and underline the pervasiveness of consumerism and the commercialization of gender" (33). Traditional messages of gender role are reinforced where women are featured in decorative roles (39). Rafman (1993) studied the evolution of Chinese cinema from the 1930s until the 1990s and found that the majority of the roles for Chinese women sustain a stereotypical and traditional image of women and girls. She also points out that movies that depict a more modern image of women, where they are portrayed as independent and thinking individuals, are produced by female filmmakers. But how are Chinese women and girls portrayed in Malaysian popular culture

and what are the understandings of feminism and female empowerment among the Malaysian Chinese female population?

Like Indian women, Chinese females are underrepresented in Malaysian mass media. There have been ethnic tensions between the Malays and Chinese for decades, which culminated in the 13 May riots in 1969. Since then, many social and economic policies have been implemented that favour the Bumiputera, the ethnic Malays. As mass media is under tight control of the Malaysian government –which is run by ethnic Malays- the underrepresentation of Chinese characters in mainstream media may likely be on purpose. In this policy of mass media's ethnic-narrow casting the Malaysian government successfully creates a polarized society. Chinese females are either portrayed in mass media in stereotypical roles or they are sexualised. This does not really come as a surprise, given that women from other ethnicities are also generally portrayed in mass media in stereotyped roles, as explained in previous parts of this thesis. But how do Malaysian Chinese women interpret feminism and what is their understanding of female empowerment?

Joseph states that there are four dimensions that characterize Chinese identity in Malaysia: Confucian values, language, diet and adaption to Malay dominance (70). She says that Chinese femininity is strongly intertwined with Chinese identity, but that Malaysian Chinese girls distance themselves from traditional philosophy “in which women are not treated as individuals in their own right and are seen as subordinate to their husbands (70). She explains that instead, nowadays “the dominant discourses of Chinese female empowerment circulating within the Malaysian public domain include cultural markers such as materialism, competitiveness, hard work and social freedom” (70). Chinese women are much more focused on being financially independent compared to Malay and Indian women. For them, empowerment is experienced through consumerism and materialism, as these are markers for being independent and successful. Unlike Malay or Indian women, the focus lies

less on beauty, but rather on money. It must be noted that in recent years there have been a number of race-based pageants designed for Chinese ladies, of which the Miss Malaysia Chinese International pageants has been the biggest. Competing in beauty pageant is arguably a way of empowerment, but it must be noted that the focus currently lies on financial independence.

When it comes to independent media, there is, interestingly enough, not much engagement from Malaysian Chinese women. There are several Youtube media from Malaysian Chinese males that have grown big in recent years, focussing mostly on comedy. There are virtually no Malaysian Chinese female vloggers on Youtube and also Instagram is not really used as a platform to creatively express oneself. It seems as if Chinese women in Malaysia are not actively using popular culture media, let alone for expressions of feminism. One exception to this case would be Joyce Chu, or famously known as Si Ye Cao, a singer-song writer who rose to fame in 2014 with her song 'Malaysia Chabor'. There are others too who are active on the Internet, such as blogwriter yangbaobei1314 ([yangbaobei1314.blogspot.com](http://yangbaobei1314.blogspot.com)), but she mostly writes about life outside of Malaysia. Chinese Malaysian women who actively express themselves on social media or blogs, seem to have a few things in common: all communication is in Mandarin, they focus and write about life outside of Malaysia, they engage with followers outside of Malaysia (mostly Chinese followers), and if you wouldn't know better, you would think they had no relation to Malaysia. This is interesting because it suggests that Chinese women in Malaysia are much more focused on what goes on outside of Malaysia, and that if one truly wants to understand notions of feminism among the Chinese population, one must look at Chinese popular culture instead of Malaysian popular culture. This reinforces the idea that there are other forces that influence Malaysian popular culture, such as Indian and Chinese popular culture.

Now representations in popular culture of women from the three major ethnicities in Malaysia and their respective notions of female empowerment have been analysed, the role of class will be examined.

#### 4.2 The case of class

In the second chapter the role of class in the analysis of feminism has briefly been discussed. Now that we found that expressions of feminism among different ethnic groups are indeed different, the case of class needs to be discussed. Joseph discusses the interplay between socio-economic factors and different ideas of femininity, self-determination and individuality in her book and argues that women of different classes generally experience feminism differently. To illustrate, girls from upper class families are generally more stimulated to engage with Western cultural forms, because it is considered a necessary preparation for possible overseas study (74). These young women have greater access to “a range of status goods and global cultural products such as imported fashion and luxury goods and electronic products compared to young women from low socioeconomic backgrounds” (74). Women and girls from higher classes do not only have greater access to status goods such as Western fashion because they have more money, it is also more accepted within their social communities. It is more accepted for girls from wealthy families to dress in a Western style and follow Western fashion. It is even accepted to show skin, whereas for girls from lower-class families this is considered absolutely unacceptable. In addition, most girls who wear a tudung, or headscarf, are from lower classes. Whereas headscarf’s used to be a dress for higher classes, in the last decades it has become “a dress for the common people, and a sign of modesty” (Hamidaddin 1).

Women generally have the same access to images of Western lifestyles (through television, advertisements, magazines), regardless of class. How these images are interpreted

and the extent to which these Western discourses are used in someone's personal life really depends on class. Young ladies from middle and upper class families, regardless of ethnicity, are generally more likely to adopt a Western lifestyle, simply because their families approve. Their parents probably spent some years overseas in their younger years to study and want the same for their children. Having some familiarity with Western culture, values and dress is therefore considered beneficial. This naturally leads to the notion that if there is a growing sense of feminism among women in Malaysia, it is among women from higher classes, regardless of ethnicity. Ethnicity is still important here because women from different ethnicities experience female empowerment differently, be it through entrepreneurialism, individuality, beauty, fashion, materialism, consumerism or financial independence. However, there seems to be a commonality between upper class Malay, Indian and Chinese women; following a Western lifestyle is more accepted and stimulated within their communities than it is in lower class communities.

To conclude, this chapter has discussed the role of ethnicity and class in the analysis of feminism in Malaysia. The difference in portrayals of women from Malay, Indian and Chinese ethnicity in popular culture and their respective notions of female empowerment show that feminism in Malaysia is a complex and multifaceted movement. This chapter has shown the interplay of ethnicity and class in the story of feminism in Malaysia and has demonstrated that it really has multiple layers. Class appears to be of significant importance in situating where feminism is evolving at the moment. If, in recent years, there has been a growing sense of feminism in Malaysia, this chapter has answered an important question; namely, *where* exactly. In the case of Malaysian women, this growing sense of feminism results in entrepreneurialism and individuality as discussed in chapter two. Due to the lack of research on the interplay of feminism and ethnicity, not much conclusive can be said about

the Indian and Chinese women, except that these women experience female empowerment through beauty, fashion, materialism, consumerism and financial independence. If anything final can be said, it is that upper-class women from all ethnicities in Malaysia are increasingly following a Western lifestyle.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, this thesis aimed to assess whether there is a growing sense of feminism in Malaysian popular culture. In the second chapter mass media, independent media and the

different expressions and significations of female empowerment were analysed. The difference between government-controlled media and independent media, where individuals are free of influence of corporate or government interests proved to be of great significance in this analysis. In mass media, women are usually portrayed in stereotypical characters and roles, with traits such as religious, pious, and dependent on male partners being most evident. Since mass media is regulated by the government, so are notions of feminism and female empowerment as shown on mass media. As a result, notions of feminism and female empowerment are usually religious based. The analysis of independent media, and its portrayal of women and expressions of feminist ideas show a quite different story. Independent media and more specifically Instagram provide a platform of resistance and change in how women are portrayed in Malaysian popular culture. Even though there is a culture of expressive moderation, independent media increases a woman's ability to challenge normative portrayals of women as conveyed in mass media.

Chapter three examined the four phases of feminism as identified by Ng et al. and the different expressions of feminism in popular culture during these phases. Throughout the different phases Malaysian women experienced senses of empowerment through various things; education and Islam in the first phase, sexuality, beauty and fashion in the second phase, embracement of Western culture in the third phase and consumerism in the fourth phase. I added a fifth phase that I called entrepreneurial feminism, which is essentially centred on female entrepreneurship as a way of empowering women. The female individual who promotes herself and her products through social media is a focal point of this phase. Two case studies were used to illustrate the different ways of how feminism is expressed in popular culture during this phase. An important aspect of this phase is that most of these entrepreneurial feminists are from upper-class families. The idea that class plays an important

role in the analysis of feminism in popular culture is further discussed in chapter four, which deals with ethnicity and class.

Representations of women from Malay, Indian and Chinese ethnicity in Malaysian popular culture and their respective notions of female empowerment were discussed in this chapter. This chapter critically pointed out that Malaysian popular culture is not a singular entity, but that it is heavily influenced by Indian and Chinese popular culture, as programs that are broadcasted on Malaysian popular culture media are in many cases produced outside of Malaysia, in India or China. In mainstream media Indian and Chinese women and girls are severely underrepresented, but in other categories of popular culture media—those belonging to independent media—different ways of empowerment can be identified. Indian women are increasingly experiencing empowerment through beauty pageants. Although Chinese women are experiencing female empowerment through materialism, consumerism and financial independence, they are not actively using popular culture media for expressions of feminism. This chapter also discussed the case of class in the analysis of feminism in Malaysian popular culture. It found that girls from upper class families are generally more stimulated to engage with Western cultural forms, because it is considered a necessary preparation for possible overseas study (Joseph 74). Class therefore becomes an extremely important aspect in answering the question if there is a growing sense of feminism in Malaysian popular culture.

Is there a growing sense of feminism in Malaysian popular culture? This thesis found that there indeed is a growing sense of feminism, but that it is limited to specific popular culture categories—that of independent media— and class. Upper class women, most evidently of Malaysian ethnicity, are expressing progressive notions of feminism and female empowerment. This growing sense of feminism results in entrepreneurialism and individuality as discussed in chapter two. A relevant question that comes forth of this conclusion is; to what extent are media of popular culture effective in spreading feminist

ideas? As shown in chapter 2, 3 and 4, the immense popularity of social media is absolutely instrumental in transmitting feminist ideology, issues and beliefs. It is here considered 'effective' because it is free of government control or regulation, which enables women to freely express themselves without restrictions.

This thesis demonstrated that feminism in Malaysia is a complex and multifaceted movement that really has multiple layers. Several factors proved to be key in understanding the complex story of feminism in popular culture, such as the levels of freedom of popular culture media, the rise of social media, ethnicity, religion, and class. It is certainly an interesting phenomenon that deserves more academic attention, as any analysis of popular culture helps to understand how the world around us works.

#### Works Cited

Ahmad, Mahyuddin. "Colonial Policies, the Marketplace and the Malaysian Film Industry ."

*SEMINAR ON FILM INDUSTRIES IN ASIA AND EUROPE .*

“Instagram Monthly Active Users 2018 | Statistic.” *Statista*,

[www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/](http://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/).

Ariffin, Rohana. “Malaysian Women in the Modern Era.” *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1997, p. 69., doi:10.22439/cjas.v12i1.2176.

Avakian, Arlene Voski, and Barbara Haber. “Feminist Food Studies: A Brief History.” *University of Massachusetts Amherst* .

Bin Abd. Rahim, Mohd Helmi, et al. “WOMEN ADVERTISING PRACTITIONERS IN MALAYSIA: VIEWS ON CAREER SATISFACTION.” *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 26, no. 2, 2010, pp. 67–86.

Brummet, Barry. *Rhetorical Dimensions Of Popular Culture*. Univ of Alabama Pr, 2004.

Chan, Lydia. “Neelofa and Vivy Yusof Talk about Feminism at Forbes Under 30 Summit Asia.” *ELLE Malaysia*, 27 July 2017,

[www.elle.my/celebrity/News/Neelofa-and-Vivy-Yusof-on-feminism-at-the-Forbes-Asia-30-Under-30-conference](http://www.elle.my/celebrity/News/Neelofa-and-Vivy-Yusof-on-feminism-at-the-Forbes-Asia-30-Under-30-conference).

Damant, Dominique, et al. “Taking Child Abuse and Mothering Into Account.” *Affilia*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2008, pp. 123–133., doi:10.1177/0886109908314321.

Doukakis, Anna. “Asian Studies Association of Australia Biannual Conference, Melbourne, July 2008. .” “NOW WE WANT MALAYS TO AWAKE...” *THE MALAY WOMEN TEACHERS OF JOHOR AND BULAN MELAYU* 1.

Doukakis, Anna. “‘NOW WE WANT MALAYS TO AWAKE...’ THE MALAY WOMEN TEACHERS OF JOHOR AND BULAN MELAYU.”

Faizal Ahmad, Muhammad. “Internet Usage Statistics in Malaysia for 2017.” *IAMK Learning Centre*, IAMK Learning Centre, 12 Jan. 2018,

[iamk.com.my/articles/2018/01/12/internet-usage-statistics-in-malaysia-for-2017/](http://iamk.com.my/articles/2018/01/12/internet-usage-statistics-in-malaysia-for-2017/).

“Feminism and Pop Culture - Signed.” *Bitch Media*, Bitch Mart,

[www.bitchmedia.org/bmart/books/feminism-and-pop-culture-signed](http://www.bitchmedia.org/bmart/books/feminism-and-pop-culture-signed).

Feng, Yang, and Kavita Karan. “The Global and Local Influences in the Portrayal of Women’s Roles: Content Analysis of Women’s Magazines in China.” *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, Feb. 2011, pp. 33–44.

Firdaus, Amira. “Ethnic Identity and News Media Preferences in Malaysia.” *Curtin University, Perth, Australia*, ARC APFRN SIGNATURE EVENT, 2006.

Ghani, Yusof, and Norliana Ali Haidzir. “Understanding Media Exposure among the Ethnic Malay in Malaysia for the Purpose of Communicating Road Safety Messages.” *Egyptian Journal of Medical Human Genetics*, Elsevier, 11 Dec. 2014.

Hamidaddin, Abdullah. “When I Wore the Hijab: Power and the Headscarf.” *Al Arabiya English*, Al Arabiya English, 30 Nov. 2013,  
[english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2013/11/30/When-I-wore-the-hijab-Power-and-the-headscarf.html](http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2013/11/30/When-I-wore-the-hijab-Power-and-the-headscarf.html).

Hayes-Conroy, Allison, and Jessica Hayes-Conroy. “Taking Back Taste: Feminism, Food and Visceral Politics.” *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2008, pp. 461–473.,  
doi:10.1080/09663690802300803.

Ibrahim, Faridah, et al. “Portrayal of Women's Images in Television Dramas: A Malaysian Case.” *SHS Web of Conferences*, vol. 33, 2017, p. 00063.,  
doi:10.1051/shsconf/20173300063.

“INTERNET USERS SURVEY 2017.” *Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission*, 2017.

Joseph, Cynthia. *Growing up Female in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia*. 2014.

Jovanovic, Maja. "Selling Fear and Empowerment in Food Advertising." *Food, Culture & Society*, vol. 17, no. 4, Dec. 2014, pp. 641–663.,

doi:10.2752/175174414x14006746101871.

Kantola, Johanna, and Judith Squires. "From State Feminism to Market Feminism?"

*International Political Science Review*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2012, pp. 382–400.,

doi:10.1177/0192512111432513.

Larabee, Ann. "Editorial: Celebrity, Politics, and the Me Too Moment." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2018, pp. 7–9., doi:10.1111/jpcu.12650.

Lie, Merete, et al. "Chapter 2: Change and Continuity: Revisiting the Field and Changing

Analytical Positioning in Understanding Gender." *Gendered Entanglements:*

*Re-Visiting Gender in Rapidly Changing Asia*, NIAS Press, 2015.

Loone, Susan. "Ad Industry, Media Guilty of Gender Stereotyping." *Malaysiakini*, 8 Mar.

2001, [www.malaysiakini.com/news/1197](http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/1197).

*Malaysia Internet Users*. Internet Live Stats, 2016,

[www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/malaysia/](http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/malaysia/).

"Malaysia Profile - Media." *BBC News*, BBC, 5 Sept. 2017,

[www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15384221](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15384221).

*Malaysians Most Active Instagram Users in Asia Pacific, as Popularity of Photo-Sharing*

*Surges*. Kantar TNS,

[www.tnsglobal.com/asia-pacific/intelligence-applied/malaysians-most-active-instagram-users-asia-pacific-popularity-photo-sharing](http://www.tnsglobal.com/asia-pacific/intelligence-applied/malaysians-most-active-instagram-users-asia-pacific-popularity-photo-sharing).

Michael, Tom. "Malaysian Advert 'Claims Having Whitened Skin Stops Domestic Abuse'."

*The Sun*, The Sun, 18 Oct. 2017,

[www.thesun.co.uk/news/4711532/malaysia-skin-whitener-advert-domestic-abuse-slim-mewhite/](http://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4711532/malaysia-skin-whitener-advert-domestic-abuse-slim-mewhite/).

- Mokhsein, Mai. "The Choice Feminist Delusion." *Theblog.org*, 18AD.
- Molek, Cek Mek. "Cek Mek Molek: Patriarchy vs. Feminism." *Poskod Malaysia*, 4 Apr. 2013, [poskod.my/features/cek-mek-molek-patriarchy-vs-feminism/](http://poskod.my/features/cek-mek-molek-patriarchy-vs-feminism/).
- Ng, Cecilia, et al. *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: an Unsung (r)Evolution*. Routledge, 2009.
- Nguyen, Giselle Au-Nhien. "Has the Commercialisation of Feminism Hurt or Helped the Movement?" *I-d Vice*, 26 June 2016, [i-d.vice.com/en\\_au/article/mbv4wy/has-the-commercialisation-of-feminism-hurt-or-helped-the-movement](http://i-d.vice.com/en_au/article/mbv4wy/has-the-commercialisation-of-feminism-hurt-or-helped-the-movement).
- Rafman, Carolynn. "Imagining a Woman's World: Roles for Women in Chinese Films." *Cinemas: Revue D'attitudes Cinematographiques*, vol. 3, no. 2-3, 1993, p. 126., doi:10.7202/1001195ar.
- Rahman, Zainurul, et al. "Wanita Magazines (1969–1980): National Narratives, Imageries of Modernity and Womanhood in Nation Building." *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse*, vol. 14, 2015. Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Ramzy, Austin. "Malaysia Suspends 2 Newspapers Covering Scandal at State-Owned Fund." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 24 July 2015.
- Rehman, Sharaf. "Portrayal of Women in the Popular Indian Cinema Portrayal of Women in the Popular Indian Cinema." *Studia Filologiczne Uniwersytetu Jana Kochanowskiego.*, July 2017, pp. 157–173.
- "THAVIA." *THAVIA | Designer | NOT JUST A LABEL*, [www.notjustalabel.com/designer/thavia](http://www.notjustalabel.com/designer/thavia).
- Thomas, Carla. "Vivy Yusof: Meet Malaysia's Youngest E-Commerce Mogul." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 9 Aug. 2017,

[www.forbes.com/sites/cfthomas/2017/08/09/vivy-yusof-meet-malaysias-youngest-e-commerce-mogul/#3407859553e3](http://www.forbes.com/sites/cfthomas/2017/08/09/vivy-yusof-meet-malaysias-youngest-e-commerce-mogul/#3407859553e3).

“What Is an Influencer? - Factors That Define a Social Media Influencer.” *Influencer Marketing Hub*, [influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-an-influencer/](http://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-an-influencer/).

Wong, Syiling. “Malay Women Magazine after Independence Part 1.” *Quench Your Thirst*, 26 June 2015, [sweeling1995mediaculture.wordpress.com/2015/06/17/malay-women-magazine-after-independence/](http://sweeling1995mediaculture.wordpress.com/2015/06/17/malay-women-magazine-after-independence/).

Yeoh, Seng Guan. *Media, Culture and Society in Malaysia*. Routledge, 2011.

Zahar, Iwan, and Nur Hafezah Hussein. *STUDENTS' AWARENESS ON GENDER ISSUES THROUGH CHICK FLICKS: A CASE STUDY IN KELANTAN, MALAYSIA*. Forum Ilmiah IX FPBS UPI (Seminar Internasional), 2013.