The Choice of Adjectives in Describing Celebrities in Online Fashion Articles: A Gender-Based Study

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Abstract: Issues revolving around gender and language have become an ongoing debate for ages. Numerous researchers have shown their interest on the way men and women differ in using language. These differences, according to Lakoff (1975), include the choice of adjectives. In spite of that, there have not yet been many studies concerning how men and women are associated with certain adjectives. Consequently, this study aims to delve into how male and female celebrities are portrayed using various adjectives in online fashion articles. Descriptive qualitative method was utilized in this study. The data were obtained from six latest fashion articles from GQ and Elle Magazine, which were accessed online. In addition, the data were then analyzed by referring to Lakoff's theory (1975). The results revealed that the choice of adjectives in describing male celebrities differed from the ones used to depict female celebrities. Neutral adjectives such as "simple", "excellent", and "classic" were often addressed to the male celebrities, while in describing the female ones, a wider range of adjectives were chosen, namely "dainty", "lavish", and "ostentatious". This indicates that certain adjectives are somewhat still gender-linked.
Keywords: adjectives, gender, fashion articles

INTRODUCTION

A number of linguists have been interested in investigating the differences between men's and women's language (Al-Harahseh, 2014; Hanafiyeh & Afghari, 2014; Park et al., 2016; Meier et al., 2020; Coats, 2021). This is due to the stereotypical assumptions that the language used by women is "warmer, more compassionate, and polite", while language used by men seems to be "colder, more hostile, and impersonal" (Park et al., 2016). In addition to that, Meier et al.'s study (2020) also pointed out that women's language is considered as "beautiful", while men's language is defined as "ingenious".

Lakoff (1975, p.8) initially defined that there is such thing as 'women's language', which is said to be deficient, if compared to men's language. This theory belongs to the deficit approach of gender studies, which was the first approach in this field (Coates, 2016, p.6). According to Lakoff (1975, p.12), differences between the language of women and men also include the choice of adjectives. Women are said to have more tendency to use empty adjectives (e.g. *lovely, divine*), while men are more likely to employ neutral adjectives such as "great" and "cool". Hanafiyeh and Afghari's study (2014) supported Lakoff's deficit theory, as their findings showed that women use hedges, tag question, intensifiers, and empty adjectives more than men. The research results of Barczewska and Andreasen (2018) also prove that women have a wider range of adjectives if compared to men. Furthermore, Hussey et al. (2014) stated that men's speech oftentimes includes the frequent use of judgmental adjectives, whereas women's speech tends to contain emotional references.

Despite the fact that previous researchers have conducted studies on how men and women differ in using language, there have not yet been many studies concerning how men and women are described using different adjectives, especially in the media. Shor et al. (2019) claimed that the amount of coverage between men and women in media has been unequal. The way media portrays men and women differently, using different words, have the power to construct the images of gender in the readers' minds (Strumska-Cylwik & Ibrahim, 2014). A few researchers have investigated gender portrayals in printed media, such as newspapers and magazines. For instance, Bridges and Wadham (2019) examined how military women were portrayed in Australian print media. Nevertheless, these days, majority of people prefer online media over printed press, as the popularity of Internet is gradually increasing and it can be accessed from any technical device such as smartphones and tablets (Strumska-Cylwik &

Ibrahim, 2014). Hence, this study discusses the choice of adjectives in describing male and female celebrities in online fashion articles, namely from GQ and Elle Magazine.

Gender and Language

Various factors may influence the way men and women use language differently. The existing cultural norms shape society's perceptions on how men and women should behave and express themselves in social situations, including using language (Hussey et al., 2014). Gender-based differences in using language have caught many researchers' interest, varying from pronunciation, morphology, syntactic constructions, semantic as well as style approaches (Al-Harahseh, 2014). These studies pointed out that language features happen to be gender-linked in some cases, meaning that there are words, phrases, and sentences that are employed more often by one gender than another (Park et al., 2016). In addition to that, Park et al. (2016) strengthen the point by claiming that women have greater tendency to use words that describe positive emotions (e.g. "excited", "happy", "love"), social relationships (e.g. "friends", "family", "sister"), and intensive adverbs (e.g. "sooo", "ridiculously"). On the other hand, the language use of men is highly associated with those related to politics, sports, competition, and other specific activities which are considered as 'male-linked' (e.g. playing video games).

The choice of adjectives has also become the focus of gender and language research. As what Lakoff (1975) initially proposed, women have numerous options of adjective to use, such as *fantastic, lovely, sweet, cute, precious, charming, dreamy, adorable,* and *divine,* while men prefer using neutral adjectives (e.g. "good", "bad"). Barczewska & Andreasen (2018) prove that women have more diverse range of adjectives if compared to men. Nevertheless, both genders may also have similarities in using adjectives. As an instance, both men and women often use basic adjectives such as "good" and "different" in daily conversations. There is also a tendency that men use empty adjectives such as "lovely". Though some studies have carried out the differences between men and women use adjectives, studies on adjectives used in describing men and women are currently still lacking.

Gender and Media Portrayal

The media portrays the opinions, beliefs, and ideas shared within a society, which includes how people perceive issues related to gender (Strumska-Cylwik & Ibrahim, 2014). A number of previous studies carried out results that show how women receive less media coverage than men (Strumska-Cylwik & Ibrahim, 2014; Bridges & Wadham, 2019). This might be due to the gender-biased portrayals in the media, meaning that there is an inclination towards male subjects (Shor et al., 2019). Additionally, Shor et al. (2019) claimed that men in the media are generally perceived as "more competent", "interesting", and "worthy of public attention". Consequently, the language used by media somewhat takes part in shaping the image of women as inferior to men. This resulted in the use of different words to describe men and women in the media.

Nonetheless, in some cases, it is also evident that women have received more valuable representations. Shor et al. (2019), in their study, found that women leaders are described with a range of adjectives including "firm", "confident", and "competent" as well as other words which are usually directed at men. In spite of that, further studies are still needed in order to examine gender portrayals in the media. Since little attention has been paid on portrayals of male and female celebrities in the media, this study investigates the choice of adjectives in describing celebrities in online fashion articles, particularly in GQ and Elle Magazine.

METHOD

This study aims to delve into the choice of adjectives used in describing male and female celebrities in online fashion articles. Thus, descriptive qualitative method was suitable for this research. Two fashion magazines, namely GQ and Elle, were chosen as the data source. GQ (Gentlemen's Quarterly) is a monthly American-based men's magazine, founded in 1931, which provides articles which are associated with men's fashion, style, culture, and many more. In addition, Elle is also an

international women's magazine which focuses on fashion, beauty, and lifestyle, which was founded in 1945. Moreover, these two magazines are available for online access.

Six latest fashion articles which were obtained from GQ (www.gq.com) and Elle (www.elle.com), were selected as the data. The titles of the chosen articles are: 1) "Oscars 2022: The Best Outfits at the 94th Annual Academy Awards" (March 27, 2022), 2) "Met Gala 2022: All the Best Dressed Celebrities on the Red Carpet" (May 2, 2022), 3) "Best-Dressed Men of the Week" (June 16, 2022), 4) "Oscars 2022: The Best Dressed Stars On The 94th Academy Awards Red Carpet" (March 27, 2022), 5) "The Best Dressed Celebrities at The 2022 Met Gala" (May 3, 2022), and 6) "The Look: May's Best-Dressed List" (May 31, 2022). Then, the researcher examined the choice of adjectives in describing male and female celebrities by referring to Lakoff's deficit theory (1975). Finally, the researcher drew the conclusion based on the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that a range of adjectives are employed in online fashion articles, particularly in describing male and female celebrities. First of all, when it comes to depicting male celebrities, there is a great tendency that the media opt for neutral adjectives. The data are listed as follows:

(1) "Kenneth Branagh in Dolce & Gabbana – The Belfast director keeps it simple in a navy three-piece."
(2) "Travis Barker in Maison Margiela – Excellent trouser proportions on Kourtney Kardashian's date."
(3) "James McAvoy - A slick, almost minimalist take on white tie."

Datum (1) depicts the use of "simple" in describing the style of a male celebrity, i.e. Kenneth Branagh. This adjective, according to Lakoff (1975, p.12), belongs to the category of neutral adjectives. In other words, neutral adjectives are the ones that can be employed by both genders. Another neutral adjective is shown in datum (2), which is "excellent". In this case, the adjective is directed at Travis Barker's choice of trousers. Though these two data indicate how adjectives that are associated with male celebrities are somewhat basic, datum (3) proves that there is a chance that uncommon adjectives such as "slick" and "minimalist" may be employed in describing men's style. Nevertheless, other data reinforce that the use of neutral adjectives still dominates online fashion articles about men. These adjectives include "formal", "stylish", and "cool", which are presented as follows:

(4) "Tyler Perry in Brioni – Perry goes extra-formal with a white bowtie".
(5) "Giveon – Wait, is Giveon hip-hop's most stylish man?"
(6) "Evan Mock – Coolest guy in the office."

In this case, it is apparent that the adjective choice in datum (4) to describe Tyler Perry's style is "formal". However, there is an exaggeration "extra-" before the adjective. The similar thing applies to datum (5) and (6), where the neutral adjectives are written in the superlative form. While datum (5) contains a praise for Giveon who is considered as "hip-hop's most stylish man", datum (6) serves as a compliment for Evan Mock, as indicated by the adjective choice "coolest". These data are in line with Lakoff's claim (1975, p.12) that men are oftentimes associated with neutral or basic adjectives.

On the other hand, data that depict the choice of adjectives in describing female celebrities are quite different from the male ones. This is evident since a variety of adjectives can be found in the online fashion articles about female celebrities. The following data represent the adjectives which are directed at female celebrities.

(7) "Natalia Dyer – Nancy Wheeler makes punk look elegant with this corseted dress in silk jacquard and tulle detail."
(8) "Rebel Wilson – Form-fitting, elegant, and festive all at once."
(9) "Ellis Ross wore a stunning strapless red dress by Carolina Herrera."

First of all, datum (7) describes the look of Natalia Dyer by employing "elegant" as the adjective. This adjective is also present in datum (8), which depicts Rebel Wilson's style. This indicates that "elegant" is more likely to be used in describing female celebrities, which supports Lakoff's theory (1975, p.12) that there are certain female-linked adjectives. Other adjectives that can be found in datum (8) include "form-fitting" and "festive". These two adjectives can be considered as uncommon as well,

however, it implies that women have a greater range of adjectives. Additionally, in datum (9), there is the use of "stunning" in describing Tracee Ellis Ross' choice of dress.

(10) "Lively's Atelier Versace gown fused an Art Deco pattern with the lavish fabrics of the Gilded Age. It's ostentatious but not tacky—exactly what the dress code called for."

(11) "Coughlan wore a feathery baby pink and ebony gown with matching eyeshadow and dainty diamond jewels."

(12) "Simple but angelic, this Saint Laurent look on Hailey Bieber feels playful without veering into the territory of tacky."

In accordance with the previous three data, datum (10) presents three sophisticated adjectives used in describing Blake Lively's gown, such as "lavish", "ostentatious", and "not tacky". Moreover, as shown in datum (11), Nicola Coughlan's look is described with the adjectives "matching" and "dainty". Though this strengthens Lakoff's claim (1975, p.12) that women have their own list of adjectives, datum (12) shows that neutral adjectives can be opted for female celebrities. In this case, Hailey Bieber is described as "simple"—similar to datum (1) which is directed at a male celebrity. However, other adjectives are also present in datum (12), namely "angelic" and "playful".

The research findings pointed out that there are some differences of adjective choice in describing male and female celebrities in online fashion articles. To begin with, adjectives that are frequently used by the media in depicting male celebrities are mainly neutral adjectives, namely "simple", "excellent", "stylish", and "formal". On the other hand, in describing female celebrities, the media has a greater variety of adjectives to choose from. This is proven through the use of adjectives such as "stunning", "lavish", "ostentatious", and "dainty", as shown in the data. The fact that those adjectives actually share the same meaning implies that there are various ways to describe the characteristics of women—in this case, female celebrities. This is in line with Barczewska and Andreasen's study (2018) that there is higher tendency for women to employ various adjectives if compared to men. Nevertheless, in some cases, what Lakoff (1975, p.12) called as "neutral adjectives" such as "simple" turned out to be applicable when it comes to describe female celebrities as well, indicating that the gender stereotypes on adjectives are slowly fading. However, in accordance with Park et al.'s claim (2016), it is undebatable that there are certain words, including adjectives, which are still gender-linked—meaning that one gender employs them more often than the other gender.

CONCLUSION

All in all, it can be concluded that the choice of adjectives in describing male and female celebrities in online fashion articles are quite different. While neutral adjectives are dominantly directed at male celebrities, a wider variety of adjectives are opted for female celebrities. Nonetheless, in some cases, these adjectives may be used interchangeably. Due to the limitations of this study, further studies on gender-linked language features such as adjectives are needed in order to improve the existing literature on gender and language.

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