CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

6.0 Summary of the Project

Like other research methods, the mixed methods approach has inherent challenges. The present study hopes to show that these challenges are not insurmountable. Consistent with the conventions of CDA, the study attempted to systematically manage the collection, collation and analysis of textual and perception data and support findings with quantitative results from a survey instrument that sought to elicit perceptions about contest entry forms and the related promotional discourse. This final chapter provides a summary of the results of these analyses, including suggestions for future research, limitations and based on the overall results, conclude with a submission on how consumer interests may be better represented with particular reference to consumer contests as promotional advertising discourse.

6.1 Conclusions

This study found that promotional advertising strategies that underlie the identified key verbal and visual components in CEFs could be used or misused by those in power (promotional advertisers) to perpetuate and reinforce deceptive messages with harmful references to consumers and individual members of our society. This phenomenon may be more damaging than previously believed since overall results from data collected through the survey strongly indicated that most people are not only unaware of the damages that misleading promotional advertising messages can introduce into their daily lives, but they have also come to accept these messages as a normal, naturalised part of their daily lives. With reference to the overall description,

explanation and interpretations presented in precedent chapters 4 and 5, the numbers of self-contradictory assertions were rife. Those participants who agreed that contests were a waste of time, went on to disclose that if others have won contest prizes, so can they. If they do not win, participants generally declared that they would not be disappointed but at the same time, protested that everyone should win. Further, participants who say that they always read the contest R&R component go on to complain that these were hard to read, and so on.

One plausible explanation for these self-contradictory results may be that the respondents, perhaps like most of us, prefer to project a "positive" image of ourselves despite our lack of understanding in certain subjects (van Dijk, 1995, p. 22). In the present case, a positive image refers to prudent, intelligent, and astute consumers as opposed to the general perception of people who are too lazy or ignorant to read the R&R of a contest that they were joining. The fact that almost 50% of the representative R&R samples in the corpus (App. XIII) were found to be illegible helps to justify this point. Despite results that reveal low levels of awareness concerning promotional advertising discourse, there were participants who expressed concerns and more encouraging levels of awareness surrounding the issues of promotional advertising discourse in their verbatim response to item Q24. It may be useful here to reiterate that these are people who offer hope and anticipation that our present predicament can be alleviated. Based on the spontaneous comments, it is possible to contend that there are consumers albeit with acceptance that promotional advertisements are a part of our daily shopping experience, who are dissatisfied, amongst others, with confusing methods, difficult to understand instructions and even with prizes that seem far more attractive than the reality. More others point a

reproachful finger at suspicious contest mechanics like the X number, which a participant argued, "puts me off because there's no skill." This indicates a general sense of confusion about how the contest's judges would go about deciding exactly what skill is required and how that skill can be judged based on a participant's sending in the "X number" of entries. As outlined in chapter 4, the list of disparaging comments, reproduced verbatim, goes on. It is also interesting to note that some people are aware of the deceptive nature of the fine print in the form of the contest R&R, which were generally described as confusing. These views of dissatisfaction go against the naturalised flow of things and may have brought these individuals to be excluded from the norm. The present study supports these expressions of discontent with hopes that more individuals may gain a better understanding about deceptive promotional advertising materials that if left unattended, may suffocate our opportunities as a society of consumers along with our nation's ambition to achieve "first class consumer mentality" (9th Malaysia plan, 2006, p. SP2). A decision to continue to avoid the key issues at the expense of our consumers can thus mean a decision to continue to stifle the collective voice of more astute consumers, and contribute towards diminishing our rights to challenge the norm and become a more liberal, fair and transparently legitimate society.

6.2 Suggestions, limitations and future research

Firstly, the researcher would like to reiterate that the present research is not an attempt to prove that it is wrong to organise or participate in contests. There are legitimate consumer contests that offer genuine benefits and prizes to consumers who display outstanding performance in a skill such as slogan writing, creative drawing or creative design, and at the same time, help businesses deliver useful, reliable and

value for money products to consumers. However, these legitimate contests do not discount the presence of contests that do not support consumers' interests. The issues surrounding the high level of publicity that often accompany the announcement of consumer contest winners to gain greater brand awareness and additional sales mileage for promotional advertisers, should perhaps warrant a different study, one that focuses on the influence of prize award announcements in the media on consumer participation in future contests. It may also be appropriate to note here that despite the obscure ways in which some contest winners are selected, there are no records of complaints about contest prizes not being awarded to their rightful winners. Although this may be directly attributed to a participant's self-blame for not reading the R&R, there is also no record of anyone who have actually successfully taken a contest organiser to court for making the R&R impossible to read.

The problem stems from promotional advertising discourse that subject consumers who have been convinced to become contest participants based on deceptive and/ or questionable claims embedded in the list of identified verbal and visual components. Manufactured responses from these kinds of promotional advertising discourse can raise negative implications and social practices at the cost of unwary consumers. To begin dealing with problems caused by questionable promotional advertising discourse particularly in CEFs, individuals and consumer protection authorities need to begin making efforts to confront dubious strategies as outlined in the present research. Efforts may also be made to implement more effective consumer protection laws and provide members of our society with relevant educational materials and easily accessible assistance aimed at limiting harmful consumer purchasing habits. The idea that people must accept and tolerate deceptive promotional advertising

discourse designed to manufacture their consent for the sole benefit of those in power exposes a deeply negative society. This form of negativity will only run deeper unless a seriously long due change is put into place to impede its damaging course. Prior to our ability to establish and be part of a more positive society that respects, appreciates and supports the rights of consumers, we need to begin to speak against ambiguous promotional advertising discourse that play on our fears and fantasies. To this end, it is interesting to observe that promotional advertising text producers have much to gain in taking note of the verbatim consumer comments and begin making efforts to produce more useful, consumer-friendly promotional advertising materials. Over and above that, more research in the areas of consumer promotional advertising materials could provide added validation for those insights and motivate promotional advertisers to better understand how they can use their positions as text encoders to restrict the employment of questionable strategies in consumer contest texts and consequently help us evolve from a negative to a more positive society. One way to begin is to learn to recognise embedded deceptive strategies within the textual components, then insist on producing fair, impartial and useful promotional advertising campaign texts that avoid maintaining or reinforcing manipulative or dishonest words and visuals.

Perhaps on a larger scale, government bodies such as the Malaysian Ministry of Information (M.O.I.) that have the authority to ensure that consumer interests are met in materials produced by promotions, advertising and media agencies should play a more active role to help restrict promotional advertisements that do not genuinely serve our consumers' interests. While the processes involved in implementing these changes can be arduous, it is also evident that the longer we ignore the need for

improvement, the harder it becomes for us to counter the greedy, consuming grip of illegitimate promotional advertising discourse in our daily lives. In this regard, further research on educating members of our society, from students to housewives and executives to professionals using the list of identified strategies could offer a positive influence. People must be shown and taught that deceptive promotional advertising discourse however subtle or commonsensical can result in serious damage by making a mockery of individual purchasing preferences: by having their consent manufactured to join contests that highlight life-altering prizes on condition that they spend more money on more products that they may not even need. The following sections offer some suggestions that revolve around three salient areas to motivate people to recognise deceptive promotional advertising language:

i. How we can better approach promotional advertising texts;

ii. How we can employ some useful CDA techniques; and

iii. How the relevant authorities can play a more active role to improve the ways in which consumer interests are represented.

6.2.1 How to approach a promotional advertising text

A useful way to approach a text, particularly one that demands you pay more money for extra products, is to first look at it in an uncritical manner and then to approach it again with a critical eye (Huckin, 1997; McGregor, 2003) paying attention to:

i. Choice, position and size of prominent images designed to capture a reader's attention such as a contest theme and pictures of prizes to be won.

ii. Foregrounding and backgrounding of certain strategies such as headlines and captions that highlight rewarding prizes and underplay the R&R.

iii. Absence of things that readers may overlook, such as how the winners for that contest will be determined.

iv. The use of presupposition and modals that take some ideas for granted as if there is no alternative.

v. Manipulation by choice of authoritative voices such as sports stars or a local artist to convey the message that certain opinions are more reliable and significant while leaving out voices that could contradict those opinions.

6.2.2 Useful CDA techniques

Readers could also benefit from using several CDA techniques as follows:

i. Examine how topicalisation is used to create a perspective by looking at the messages in the topic position (contest theme/ headline). For example, a CEF using the national day as a contest theme but employs every other sentence to refer to the product and rewards of contest participation is about convincing readers to join the contest and not the national day.

ii. Note if omission of information about agents of power (Fairclough, 2000) have occurred at sentence level. This is often achieved via nominalisation or converting a verb into a noun and passive verbs. A headline like "Win RM1 MILLION" imply that the reader will win but does not specify who will be giving who the chance to be a millionaire, thanks to the nominalisation of the word win. The headline is about the RM1MILLION and intentionally not about how or why the money is being given away.

iii. Most readers who are unaware of deceptive promotional advertising language will not question assumptions that the author appears to take for granted. Presupposition can occur at the sentence level in the form of persuasive rhetoric

to convey the impression that what an agent of power says carries more weight. For example, a sentence like, "don't miss your chance to win" presupposes that the reader is presently doing so.

iv. Watch out for insinuations that can carry double meanings particularly when the text producer can readily deny any culpability in case of the claims are challenged based on how the facts were presented. For example, a headline that says, "With F&N Condensed Milk, You Can Win a Fiat Punto" (App. I/40) conveys the message that a participant can win the car just by consuming F&N Condensed Milk. The insinuation that you will lose out on the car if you do not consume the product takes power away from those who decide not to participate. In fact, a consumer has every right to decide what is best for themselves but this right is undermined by the suggestion that not participating means losing out.

v. Connotations associated with a word or metaphors can turn an uncritical reader's heart and mind. Check for connotations that are assigned on the basis of the cultural knowledge. For example, the choice to use the popular Cantonese saying "Hou Hoy Sum" (so very happy) in the "Eat & Walk away Hou Hoy Sum contest" (App. I/70) shows that the text producer is talking directly with readers who are fluent in the Cantonese language.

vi. Observe if the tone of the text is set with the use of specific words to convey a degree of certainty, what Fairclough (1994) described as modality. The tone of doubt is introduced with words such as "could" in a sentence like "You could be our winner." Moods of contrived authority can be created simply by choice of modal phrases to assert or deny the possibility, contingency or necessity of something. For example, in the headline "Join & Win!" (App. I/78), the text demands that if you want to win, join. By implication, if you don't, you lose.

vii. Single words can convey register (Halliday, 1985; Fairclough, 1988) so consumers need to ask, “do the words ring true?” Register can be affected by choice of person: first person (I, me, my, we, our), second (you, your), and third (he, she, they, their, his, hers, him, her). For example, quoting a national athlete about a product using first person then using third person to refer to those who disagree with the spokesperson can show that the product manufacturer is more objective and hence more legitimate than those who disagree.

6.2.3 How to better represent consumer interests

The following examples are adapted from the Winconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (2008). It is presented here as a guide to help improve on our current representation of consumer interests:

i. Monitor contests that use deceptive sweepstake mechanics and misrepresent participants’ chances of winning any prize highlighted in a CEF.
ii. Promotional advertisers may be considered guilty of fraud via false verbal or visual representations to gain a consumer’s purchase.
iii. Prize notices should be regulated so once a contest winner has been determined the contest organiser must give the participant a written prize notice before requesting any payment from the consumer. The notice should include specific disclosures such as contact details of the contest organiser and the retail value of the prize that the eligible participant has been selected to receive.
iv. Should a participant be required to attend a prize giving ceremony for sales or publicity purposes, the contest organiser should ensure that the participant receives the prize prior to the ceremony held for sales and publicity purposes.

v. If the original prize is not available, instead of allowing it to be at the discretion of contest organisers, consumers must be given their choice of other prizes listed in the CEF that has equal, similar or greater value of the verifiable retail value of the prize delivered to the consumer within 30 days at no cost to the consumer.

In addition, to ensure that both consumers and promotional advertisers are in agreement with how consumer rights may be better respected and protected, a state consumer protection unit such as the online National Consumer Complaints Centre (NCCC) could be introduced. This unit may be authorised to monitor promotional advertisements in the market and allow consumers to file complaints and follow up on the progress made on their various complaints. These state units could further provide updates on consumer protection, purchasing tips and legal representation to protect consumer interests. Having personally employed the online services of the NCCC to file a consumer complaint for defraud that occurred during a national sales event organised by a major name in the banking industry, the researcher is confident that others who experienced fraud can benefit from filing a complaint and allow proper action against intentional violators, or those who are guilty of unfair business practices to be taken. Apart from the NCCC, consumers should also be aware that consumer protection problems could be reported in national newspapers and their online versions such as Malaysian's first online complaint portal established by The Star newspaper (Kam, 2004). Once published, consumers' complaints could have a direct pecuniary or fiscal risk to the large companies involved via its potential to harm the company's reputation with current and future customers, particularly if the response from these flagrant companies' representatives is evidently insufficient. While there are no official national statistics documenting the size of the fraud

industry, there is no question that exploiting consumers is big business. In the United States alone the cost runs into billions. According to Federal Trade Commission or FTC (1999), the estimated the annual cost of mail fraud alone is at US$3 billion to US$40 billion. Telemarketing fraud was estimated to cost consumers US$40 billion while deceptive marketing of health care products an additional US$100 billion, and almost everyone with an email address receives deceptive appeals on a daily basis. These facts concern mainly flagrant international offenders leaving aside uncounted amount that Malaysian consumers spend yearly on products that do not meet their purveyors' promotional advertising claims.

It is thus high time that we not only think about, but also work on improving our rights as consumers instead of accepting everything we read, particularly in CEFs. This improvement depends on our own efforts as responsible individuals and members of society to learn how promotional advertising discourse can exploit and influence our purchasing behaviour so we can proceed to demand that our rights as consumers are adequately met. As put forward in the literature reviewed, the subject of promotional advertising discourse is still limited. This situation can improve if more research on the subject of promotional advertising discourse and consumer protection were conducted in future. Promotional advertising appeals may vary according to different target consumers but the present study demonstrates that promotional advertisers persist on employing a list of identified strategies as tried and tested tools to manufacture consumer consent. Furthermore, results indicated that promotional advertisements as a social and cultural form display a preoccupation with self-gratification. For example, those who decide to participate are implied to be wiser and potentially happier and richer while those who do not by inference, are

lazy, hopeless losers. A reason why questionable promotional advertisements continue to emerge in the market is conceivably because people continue to buy into those common, constructed perceptions. As some of the comments for the open-ended item Q24 indicated, promotional advertisements cater to our society's expectations of what a contest should sound and look like, and it is this continued practice that propagates and maintains consumer subordination and promotional advertisers' dominance in our society.

As individuals born and raised in a social environment besieged with promotional advertising messages, it is easier than many may believe, to be fooled time and again, into buying additional products that may not be necessary or useful at all. This in itself means that we are forced to tolerate a significant loss of our hard-earned money, which in times of a disquieting international financial crisis could mean a greater sacrifice that we may not be able to afford. If we think about it, most of us will not find it hard to remember a time or more where we find ourselves drawn, like a moth to a fiery, bright light, to spend more than we initially thought we might on something that we do not need until we came across a promotional advertisement such as a CEF. For this shared experience, not many of us can honestly admit that we will not make another purchase mistake in future or be wrongly convinced that some future purchase is something that we want, only to find that it is not. Consumers, particularly Malaysian consumers need to seriously think about improving our rights instead of just accepting whatever we read in promotional advertising materials. We need to make an effort to be responsible individuals and members of society by searching out and learning about the ways in which words and images featured in promotional advertising texts may be employed to churn out social realities and

fantasies aimed at manufacturing our consent, so much so that we may not even realise that as consumers, we are being manipulated, exploited, and/or dominated. Specifically, we need to face the strategies that underlie promotional advertising textual components, challenge them and move on to demand that our rights as consumers be met. According to the law in the state of Winconsin, United States (Winconsin department of agriculture, trade and consumer protection, 2008), a consumer promotion is illegal if it involves winners being determined essentially by chance, even though the contest is accompanied by some skill. Notwithstanding our own national consumer protection laws in place, should we decide to adapt the basic conditions of the Winconsin state law on chance, then with immediate effect, a significant total of 51% of the entire corpus (App. XI), not to mention the 49% of representative samples that feature illegible R&R (App. XIII) would be considered illegal. While our society may differ from consumers in other parts of the world, as a society of consumers, we need to be aware of how, when and where we may be subjected to practices that compromise our rights, including deceptive gaming mechanics in promotional advertising practices.

Limitations

The present research was limited to an evaluation of a corpus of CEFs that were mostly collected from major shopping centres in the Klang Valley, and to the perceptions obtained from a sample of respondents from the promotional advertising and non-promotional advertising industries that are largely from the Klang Valley. As such, further research that focus on promotional advertising texts for analysis over a more diverse consumer base could help determine if the identified promotional advertising strategies and various appeals are as effective on people who

live outside the city centres, as they are on those who live in city centres. Additional research could also be performed on other promotional advertising materials in the media such as consumer contests in national dailies (e.g. The Star newspaper's annual Sudoku contest), magazines, television, radio and even on the Internet to find out if other deceptive types of promotional advertising strategies are used for different products, at different times of the year when certain themes like cultural festivities are especially visible in the market. Concurring with de Shazer (1991, p. 50) and consistent with the purpose of CDA, the deconstruction promotional advertising texts or to "take apart the interpretive assumptions" of its system of meaning could give consumers the space we need to accept alternative understanding, and look afresh at long established texts.

Finally, it should be said that overall results provided more evidence that CDA, supported with analytical tools from SFL and social semiotics could be regarded as a valid, reliable and relevant approach to aid our understanding of promotional advertising messages. By exemplifying how hidden ideological meanings behind the verbal and visual texts can reveal discursive sources of inequality and bias (van Dijk, 1988) CDA demonstrates that "resistance and change are not only possible, but continuously happening. But the effectiveness of resistance and the realisation of change depend on people developing a critical consciousness of domination and its modalities, rather than just experiencing them" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 4).