

Original Research Paper

## Representation of Women in Cosmetic Advertisement: A Discourse Analysis

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### ABSTRACT:

This research was conducted with the purpose to make a discourse analysis over the representation of women in the advertising of different cosmetic products. This paper has uncovered the possible ideologies underlying the advertising discourses. The significance of this study is to represent the social injustice such as unequal access to power, symbolic violence, etc through the representation of women in the advertisements discourse. By limiting the study to the three cosmetic product advertisements in the South Asian context, the researcher has used a critical-analytical method for the study. As a theoretical framework, Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model is used for the analysis of the data as it focuses on the production, reception and analysis of the text. Based on the data analysis, it is concluded that the most obvious theme in cosmetic advertisements is the exploitation of women through which they are represented merely as objects of entertainment, inferior, helpless and puppet of patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** *advertising, patriarchy, representation, exploitation*

### INTRODUCTION:

The advertising industry is one of the biggest and rapidly growing global industries, having a multibillion-dollar business of daily-used items like food items, daily appliances, cosmetic products, etc. Along with business promotion, advertisements also influence people and shape their ideologies. In this regard, Cook (2011, p.12) states, "advertisements inform, persuade, influence and perhaps change opinions, emotions and attitudes". This means that advertisements not only sell products and attract customers but also influence society and persuade people to buy things they do not want to buy. Advertising is the most influential and ideological institution of socialisation in the modern era (Kilbourne, 1999). Advertised products can influence women's behaviour in society and change their views. Indeed, in such commercials, the use of every language and image has its own hidden meaning, used to attract the consumers. In most advertisements, women are commodified and established as stereotypes (Kaur et al., 2013). In the face of such symbolic violence, it becomes essential to elaborate on how women are represented through sophisticated language and semiotics. In order to analyze the representation of women in cosmetic advertisements, three advertisements for beauty products were chosen: Ponds Age Miracle Cream, Revlon

Lipstick and Santoor Bathing Bar. The analysis is based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis as it focuses on the production and reception process of discourse rather than just analysing the text. Baudrillard's (2005) assertion that beauty is (...) an absolute religious imperative for women is well reflected in beauty-product advertisements that portray women stereotypically selling their products. Such stereotypes have the power to convince people that they are the only 'real' and 'right.' This view has been further examined by Hoepfner (2006) and he asserts that advertisements can form unconscious and unthinking attitudes about women and their abilities in society. This study supports the above views and attempts to reveal the representation of women, particularly in cosmetic advertisements, by adopting a critical discourse analysis approach as it attempts to uncover patriarchal ideologies embedded in advertisements that tend to question the representation of women in society. In this context, my argument is how advertisers use language and images to manipulate women through discourse. Therefore, this study reveals how a woman's identity is negotiated and manipulated by commercial discourse in a patriarchal society.

### Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of the study is to critically analyse the representation of women in cosmetic advertisements by uncovering the possible ideologies underlying the advertising discourse.

### **Significance of the Study:**

The study is significant in the sense that it adds knowledge to critical Discourse Analysis, as not much research has been done so far in this context. Thereby, it helps to bring awareness to society by uncovering social injustices such as unequal access to power, symbolic violence, etc through the representation of women in the advertisement discourse.

### **Hypothesis:**

The exploitation of women is involved in cosmetic advertisements. They are represented in a submissive way through cosmetic advertisements.

### **Research questions:**

This research study mainly focuses on the following research questions:

How do gender ideologies influence cosmetic advertisements?

How are women represented through commercial discourse?

How do advertisers use discourses for manipulation?

### **Delimitation:**

The study is delimited to three cosmetic advertisements only. It is limited to exploring women's representation in the cosmetic advertisement in the South Asian context only. Many studies have been carried out to examine the portrayal of women in advertisements and it is found that women are portrayed as diminutive characters. Kaur et al, (2013) claim that cosmetic advertisement portrays women as 'sex kitten stereotype' (p.87). He further adds that advertisers use women to sell their products. For this reason, the cosmetic brand uses young and physically attractive women in advertisements to lure the consumer. Similarly, Hoepfner, (2006); Birberick, (2010) and Perucha, (2009) examine that women have been projected as the weaker gender and are considered as an object of entertainment. They strongly claim that presenting such humiliating and degrading pictures of women in the advertisement, encourages the patriarchal power in society. Likewise, Eskeliner (2011), opines similar views regarding the portrayal of women in the advertisement. He claims that by using sensual pictures

of women, advertisers try to draw the attention of the consumers toward their product (p. 24). Therefore, it seems that advertisers sell the image of women to earn their profit. Many researchers have argued that the portrayal of female stereotypes conveys beliefs related to gender issues, however, this study mainly focuses on how these stereotypes are legitimized by using language. It also aims to reveal how languages are legalized in society to promote these stereotypes in a patriarchal society and how it manipulates women to promote this stereotype further.

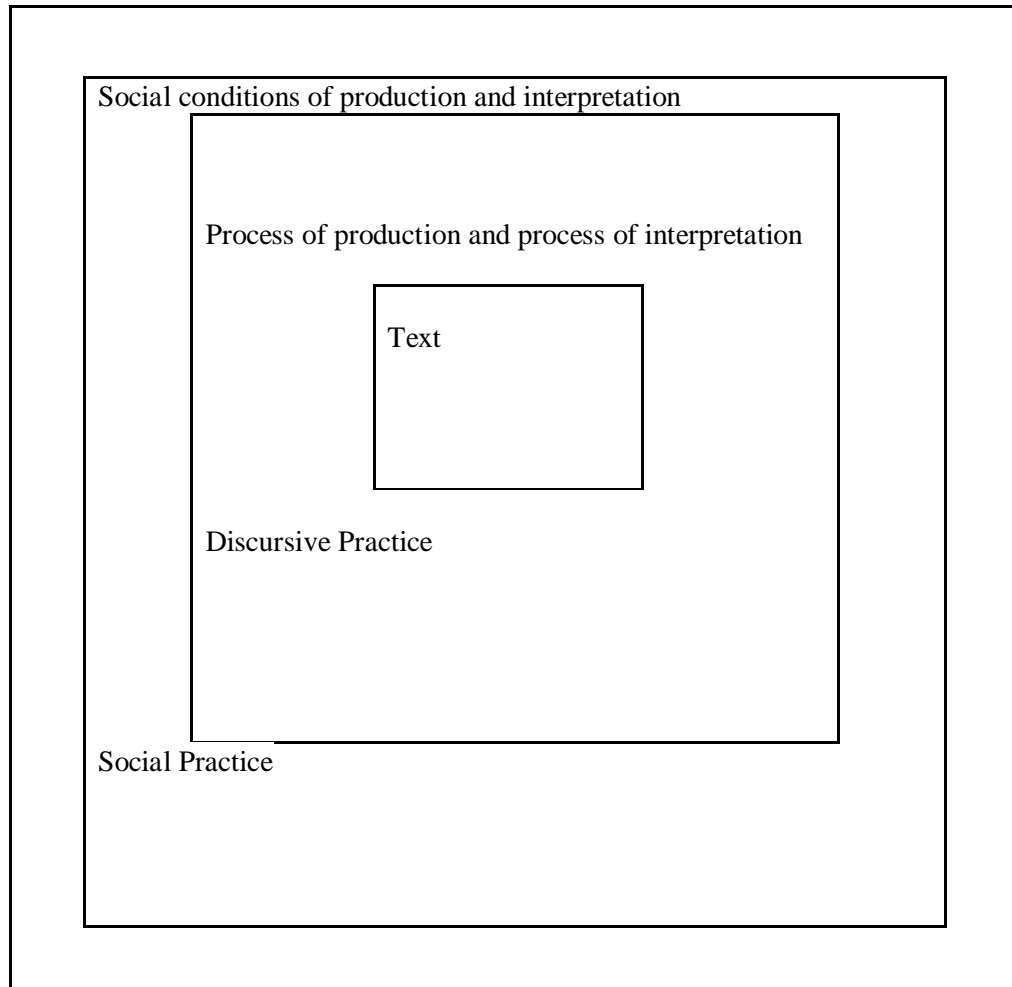
### **Methodology and theoretical framework:**

A critical-analytical method is used for the study. As a theoretical framework, Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model is used for the analysis of the data as it focuses on the production, reception and analysis of the text. This approach not only emphasises social and historical perspective but also a social practice that normalises dominant ideology and inequality (Shaikh et al, 2015).

### **Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Approach:**

Fairclough (1989) proposes three dimensions for every discourse analysis, notably a textual analysis, a discursive practice, and a social practice. The textual analysis focuses on the analysis of vocabulary, verbal texts, and relational and identification value of words. The second phase, discursive practice deals with the contextual analysis of the discourse where the object is produced and received in society. Finally, the third dimension asserts the power behind discourse or social practices because one needs to analyse socio-historical conditions in which discourse operates. In a similar way, for each dimension, there need different types of analysis. For the textual dimension, a description is needed in order to examine linguistic features in advertisements. For the second phase, interpretation is needed. This refers to a relationship between text and interaction. In the case of the third phase, social analysis or explanation is required. It emphasizes the production of discourse and the social ideologies embedded in every interaction. These three phases are interdependent with each other and can be analysed collectively. Advertising discourse is seen as a form of media discourse as it involves text, explanation and interpretation in a social context. Therefore, this three-dimensional framework is used to reveal the relationship between the nature of social practice and the properties of the language "text".

**Figure: 1 Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional approach of discourse analysis**



A qualitative design is adopted for this study as it is appropriate for exploring and analysing how discourse in advertising involves the construction of meaning according to the viewer. Data are collected from internet sources using YouTube links. The three advertisements of cosmetic products, taken as samples are Ponds age miracle cream, Santoor bathing bar and Revlon lipstick. These advertisements for cosmetic products are for fair skin and beautiful looks from various brands. Data analysis is based on Fairclough's three-dimensional approach (1989) to the CDA framework. This framework is used to show the relationship between social practice and the properties of the language "text". The main purpose of using this framework is to explore the relationship between language, ideology, and power, and to find out how advertisers convince women to buy their products. Thus, this study focuses on analyzing the linguistic features of cosmetic advertisements and interpreting them in the context of television in South Asia, and it demonstrates how the language used in advertising discourse tends to manipulate women's

beliefs and how women are represented in cosmetic advertisements.

#### **Critical discourse analysis (CDA):**

CDA is a major discipline that investigates the hidden relationships between discourse, society, power and ideology. CDA provides a roadmap to studying the relationship between society and discourse, text and context, power and Language (Luke, 1995/1996, 2002, Fairclough, 2001). According to Van Dijk (1993, p.131), CDA is "a shared perspective on doing linguistics, semiotics, or discourse analysis. Habermas (1977) claims that any language that is used for social force and domination, is the subject of CDA. It tends to uncover the interests of a particular class enacted in the discourse. According to Fairclough (1989), CDA aims at demystifying texts shaped ideologically by relations of power; it emphasizes the opaque relationship between discourse and societal structure, and it does through open interpretation and explanation. In this context, a critical discourse analyst is interested to know what structures, strategies or other properties of text and

communicative events play in the modes of reproduction (power, inequality, legitimacy of gender injustice). For this reason, CDA is dedicated to the analysis of social injustice such as unequal access to power, privileges and symbolic resources. Furthermore, it makes us able to analyse how gender inequality is discursively enacted and legitimately represented through advertisements. On the other hand, Wodak (1999) asserts that the main aim of CDA is to uncover ideologically permeated and often obscured structures of power, political control and dominance. Advertising subtly distorts reality and manipulates people to make them buy a way of life. In this sense, advertisements are important in shaping ideologies but little concentration has been provided to advertisements from critical discourse analysis. For this reason, there is indeed a need to critically analyse the use of language and other semiotic aspects in cosmetic advertisements.

### **Data analysis and discussion:**

The analysis is presented in textual (micro), discursive (meso), and social (macro) levels based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model.

### **Textual analysis:**

At the textual level of analysis, linguistic features such as vocabulary, syntax, and rhetorical tools used in advertising are discussed. The use of both personal and possessive personal pronouns such as "you" and "yours" seeks to reach the viewers directly and personally. When people speak individually rather than as part of a mass audience, it is perceived as being highly valued. The handling of this person individually is referred to as 'synthetic personalization' (Fairclough, 1989). In the advertisement 'Pond's age miracle cream' for younger-looking skin, the catchy headline "makes you feel up to 10 years younger" (appendix:1) is the tricky linguistic message that is used by the advertisers to manipulate women. The image of "beautiful ladies" and colourful packaging of cosmetic items lure the consumers and develop a great desire to have them. The advertisers use adjectives, concise and interesting language to make it more persuasive and attractive. Similarly, in the Santoor bathing bar advertisement, the catchy headline "The secret of your younger-looking skin" (appendix:2), reveals the same intention. These are the strategies of commercial advertisers to lure consumers. The smiling lady with red lips symbolises the beauty that lies in appearance, with sensual red lips (appendix:3). In the advertisement for Revlon lipstick, the image of an attractive lady with her smiling face represents her as if she is not a human being but an object kept in a showcase for selling. In this context, a similar argument is forwarded by Kilbourne (1999), when she asserts that

advertisers use images of women that have hidden, implicit meaning to lure consumers.

### **Discursive practice analysis:**

Similarly, at the discursive level, the study of the production and consumption of texts is involved, with a focus on how power relations are enforced. Advertisers use various strategies in their discourse to attract consumers. They use language in a way that relates to their power over beauty to overcome dissatisfaction. They show the viewers that they have something more than others. This is a case of 'we' versus 'they'. The advertisement for pond's age miracle cream (appendix:1) also tends to claim that no cream except pond's age miracle, can make you younger and beautiful which may not be true. Similarly, in the case of beauty soap (appendix:2), the advertisers lure consumers to buy santoor beauty bars for younger-looking skin. In a similar vein, in the advertisement for Revlon lipstick (appendix:3), the red lip colour symbolises the submissive character of women. Women are for decorating only and nothing else. They should be always beautiful, young and colourful. These types of designed messages are carried out through cosmetic advertisements, which have become a habit in our society and are easily digested by our societal people.

### **Social practice analysis:**

On the other hand, social practice analysis deals with rules and structures that limit human actions and interaction within a context. The meaning is obtained through interpretation. Interpretation takes place through the complex relationships between what is represented in the semiotics of advertisements and what is in people's minds. Fairclough (1989) terms the cognition of the receiver's mind as Member Resources (MR). Thus, MR refers to the historical knowledge that the advertiser implies that the people have. That is the reason, the use of beautiful women with cosmetic products and the portrayal of women as objects rather than human beings are accepted naturally and unquestioningly by masses in the society as if there is nothing wrong. Thus, the cosmetic advertisements create a glamorous myth in the mind of people along with the cosmetic product and put forward the sex appeal of the model. Cosmetic advertisements usually show young, beautiful and attractive women who can arouse the senses of the viewer. In these three advertisements, the advertisers do not only promote their products but also highlight society's standards of beauty and cultural values in the viewers' lifestyles. The beautiful young women in these advertisements are actually for the promotion of their business, to sell their products. It tries to establish the belief in the mind of people that the women who use these products can achieve the status of those glamorous

celebrities. Therefore, we can take it as a strategy to sell their products by using the ideology of beauty and so manipulating women. Similarly, by using the intertextuality technique, the advertiser tries to attract viewers by using words of science or research while advertising beauty products. The words like ‘anti-aging’, ‘nourished skin’, ‘retinol-c’ etc are some of the scientific terms that are used to convince the consumers that these products are real or original. Through advertising, identity is also created. Advertising makes women feel that to be part of “in the group” rather than “outside the group” they have to buy the products. They will be like celebrities or famous people who look good with the product. It seems to suggest that to be successful one need to use these products that famous women or celebrities use. Thus, it can be said that through advertising discourse, the advertisers exploit women to use their products. The glamorous looks of women in all these three cosmetic advertisements try to give the message to the consumers that ‘to be beautiful, you must have to buy these products’. In this way, the advertisers interpret the meaning of their products and convince them to buy their products. Based on data analysis from advertisements, it can be concluded that advertisers use various linguistic tools such as mentioning directly, positive vocabulary, headlines, and catchy slogans to attract women's attention. The advertisements illustrate how beautiful a woman is with certain features. The cosmetic advertisement broadcast on TV shows how a lady must look beautiful to be accepted as part of the ideal woman. The use of mentioning directly or the pronoun “you” carries a certain message that the customer is of utmost importance. Through the use of such pronouns, it tries to establish a direct relationship with the consumer. Thus, consumers can be directly influenced by the product. Advertisers use the intertextuality technique to persuade viewers. The words of science, used in advertisement discourse make it authentic and persuasive. Hence, another way of attracting customers is the use of technical words. The technical words in the advertisement help convince the audience that the product has value. Technical vocabulary reflects expertise which is a source of strength.

#### **Findings of the research:**

The findings indicate that women look more beautiful with wrinkle-free faces with no marks, younger-looking faces and red lips with smiling faces. All these features of women tend to represent them as objects rather than human beings. It tries to convince the consumers that being beautiful should be the prime concern of a woman and for this purpose; these cosmetic products are perfect and desirable. The relationship between discourse and ideology is explained by Fairclough's three-dimensional

model of CDA. Thus, the study finds that women have been represented in advertisements as the puppets of the patriarchal society that tends to treat them as beautiful dummies, submissive characters or helpless creatures in male dominating society. Though some studies claim that advertisements empower women by making them independent and confident, this study counterargues that it is only the strategy of the advertisers to manipulate women. It encourages the belief in society that women should focus only on their physical appearance. Instead of focusing on their study, career and other social responsibilities, they should spend their time and energy making themselves beautiful. Therefore, it can be said that cosmetic advertisements mislead women, which certainly hinders the development of a healthy society. In this research, the researcher mainly focuses on the influence of ideology in commercial discourse to expose the representation of women in advertisements and to reveal how cosmetic advertisements manipulate women in advertisement discourse. The purpose of this study is to analyse the three advertisements for cosmetic products and to see how the advertisers construct reality and maintain their power by manipulating women's ideology and how they represent women through commercial discourse. The influence of gender ideology can be seen clearly in cosmetic advertisements as the patriarchal society compels women to be limited in décor to their bodies only. This particular patriarchal ideology is revealed in these three cosmetic advertisements. Women are influenced by a gender ideology that states that beauty should be a primary goal of women. They are conscious that because they are women, they must conform to certain standards of beauty. These three cosmetic advertisements express the same view that women should be good-looking, wrinkle-free, young and beautiful and without these cosmetic items, they can never achieve such fairness. Women are represented stereotypically in cosmetic advertisements. These cosmetic advertisements create a perception that doing makeup is essential for every woman. Using beautiful women or celebrities, advertisers sell their products by manipulating women. Cosmetic advertisements often sell the image of young, beautiful and attractive women instead of aging women. Through the images, it tries to carry the message to the consumers that ‘aging is a disease’ that women should get rid of by using an anti-aging cream. Pond’s age miracle cream tries to convey the message that women who use this cream are given the promise of youthful skin. In this way, cosmetic advertisements manipulate women which can be seen in various linguistic features of these three cosmetic advertisements. Advertising discourses are described, analysed and interpreted with the help of Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA model to show the relationship between language, ideology and power.

## CONCLUSION:

Based on the data analysis, it can be concluded that the most obvious theme in cosmetic advertisements is the exploitation of women, through which they are represented merely as objects of entertainment, inferior, helpless and puppet of a patriarchal society that is regarded as normal and easily digested by the society. It is CDA that attempts to uncover the hidden messages behind the beautiful pictures in cosmetic advertisements. These cosmetic advertisements tend to exploit women by using their submissive character. Women are represented as objects rather than human beings. They are thought of as items to be kept on showcase but not as potential members of society. It is better to project women as they are rather than an ideal image of women. Advertising is a true reflection of the ideology prevalent in society. Therefore, it should represent women positively. That is how it helps to establish an egalitarian society where women are treated as equal to men. To be precise, the advertisement must work towards the emancipation of women by introducing intelligent, bold and independent women. For this, well-organized efforts are essential to foreground a new image of truly confident, courageous and independent women.

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Appendices

Appendix:1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBu0wKF3swk>



# POND'S age miracle™

Makes you feel up to 10 years\* younger.



Appendix:2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1IWGPmInak>

**SANTOOR**  
The secret  
of younger  
looking skin

2x SANDAL  
FRAGRANCE

SANTOOR  
Total Skin Care  
with Sandal & Turmeric

Appendix:3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg7TTpoKTWU>

