

From 'Fair' to 'Glow': A Discourse Analysis of Commercial Beauty Advertisements in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a discourse analysis of commercial beauty advertisements in India, focusing on the linguistic strategies employed to construct and perpetuate beauty standards. Through critical examination of advertisements from brands like *Lakme* and *Garnier*, the study unveils the intricate interplay of language, power dynamics, and societal norms in shaping perceptions of beauty. Using discourse analysis and drawing on Fairclough's framework of critical discourse analysis, the analysis discusses how advertisers strategically use language to sell not just products, but also an idealized image of beauty deeply entrenched in patriarchal values and racial biases. By deconstructing the language and imagery in these advertisements, the study aims to disgruntle the idea of beauty levied by the advertisers and at the same time understand the linguistic strategies used by the advertisers to sell their products.

KEYWORDS

Beauty; gender; fair; advertisement; discourse analysis; critical discourse analysis.

Introduction

It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong (Barbie 2020).

Capitalism is often praised by the preachers for its open market. This market is driven by people who have resources and power to create a market and sell their products. Due to the free market and the hence created competition, companies employ strenuous advertising strategies to maintain the sale of the products. The newspapers, especially in India, are flooded with colourful pages and vibrant font styles showcasing how a particular

product may change/enhance a person's life. Since the authenticity of these so-called pieces of information remain in shadows, the readers often capitulate to those advertisements and buy those products. These advertisements are transmitted through newspapers, magazines, radio, television and now, internet. The advertisers cautiously identify the medium according to the targeted consumers of the product. For instance, the coaching institutes often advertise their institution by posting their advertisements with pictures of their top scoring students on the front pages of newspapers. Since newspapers and magazines are within the reach of most of the people in India, most of the advertisers feel safe while advertising their products in newspapers.

Any text produced, oral or written, “arises from a context” (Goddard and Carey, pg. 14). Texts are produced in concordance with various discourses existing in a society. The advertisements produced in the newspapers are production and reproduction of the discourses which co-exist in the society. In other words, the contexts are often manipulated to persuade people into believing the product which is being sold. The context, according to Cook (2001), is a co-occurrence of “substance”, “music and pictures”, “paralanguage”, “situation”, “co-text”, “intertext”, “participants” and “function” (Cook, pg. 1&2). This means that advertisers have to intricately identify how the readers of the text (advertisement) can be manoeuvred with reference to a context (targeted gender, class) to sell a product.

Beauty advertisements in women’s magazines and newspapers use numerous such strategies to target women as consumers and sell their products. The body of women is represented as “capital” and as “fetish” (Baudrillard 277-282). This means that certain premises are built around the body of women whereby the beauty standards are defined or redefined in order to build a standard image. These images often come in handy with the pre-existing societal norms and patriarchal values to the advertisers and impels the readers to delve into the imperfection they possess when compared to the standards of beauty set by the stakeholders (manufacturers and the advertising agencies).

Gender and Advertisement Research

In a study conducted by a team of researchers on the language used by a beauty brand *Fair and Lovely*, it was found that this specific company established discourse in the society to increase the number of users (Iqbal et al. 2014). They also stated that they directly address the users, use positive vocabulary, catchy slogans and headlines to attract women.

The dominant theme found in such beauty advertisements was the ideal appearance of women. They eventually established that circulation of such advertisements trapped women into a standard qualification of beauty.

Another study conducted on the beauty advertisements circulated on television (Rohmah & Suhardi 2020) stated that the fact that the advertisements show only the benefits of their products itself is a manipulation. Along with such proclamation, these advertisements use emotive words, scientific terms and technical phrases to legitimise their claims. They further stated that advertisers manipulate women to believe in their products and buy them.

In a similar study (Renaldo 2017), it was found that the concept of women’s ideal beauty is constructed by advertisers. They apply numerous linguistic features like adjectives (positive and negative), modality, pronouns (for personal touch) and imperatives. Renaldo concluded that language has the power to persuade and advertisers manipulate the language to sell their products simultaneously along with “celebrity endorsement, unrealistic representation, clinical test proof, and positive-self representation” (Renaldo, pg. 153).

Qualitative research conducted on popular local women’s magazines (Kaur et al. 2013) found that advertisers manipulate women by promoting an idealised lifestyle. They manipulate readers by presenting themselves as authentic. Language used in advertising controls people’s minds. Advertisers, according to Kaur et al, are in power and thus control people through their language.

Methodology

To analyse the advertisements, I have used discourse analysis. Zellig Harris (1952) pioneered discourse analysis, examining language structures and their

social implications. He proposed methods to analyze language at various levels, from phonetics to syntax, unveiling patterns and meanings within discourse. Harris emphasized the importance of context in interpreting linguistic data, highlighting how language reflects social dynamics. His work laid the foundation for understanding how language shapes and reflects societal structures, influencing fields like linguistics, sociology, and communication studies.

Discourse of advertisements

Language works on the premise of power. Norman Fairclough (2001) in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emphasizes the interplay between language, power, and ideology, aiming to uncover hidden agendas and dominant discourses perpetuated by institutions and social structures. CDA scrutinizes both linguistic features and social practices, revealing how language constructs and maintains power relations. Fairclough's framework involves three dimensions: text analysis (micro level), discursive practice

analysis (meso level), and sociocultural analysis (macro level), providing a comprehensive tool to critique and understand the role of language in shaping social reality, especially in terms of advertisements.

Analysis

Three advertisements circulated in print media have been analysed in this study. Two advertisements are short and two are descriptive. Through the tools of discourse analysis and Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (2001), the analysis given below is presented on the textual (micro), discursive (meso) and social (macro) level.

Advertisement I: Lakme's Absolute Perfect Radiance

The following advertisement of the beauty brand Lakme features Kareena Kapoor Khan, one of the most famous actresses of Indian cinema. The product is said to be a skin-lightening serum in the advertisement.



Fig. 1. Advertisement on Lakme's skin lightening serum

The bold catchphrase uses the positive adjective of “runaway ready radiant skin”. This sends a message that if

you want to be ready for a look that models possess while walking on the ramp (runway), then you should possess this

product. It is essentially meant for women since we can see the sparkling face of the female model, Kareena Kapoor Khan, on the left side of the picture. This advertisement sells the charisma of fashion industry. On the right corner of the advertisement, a white tag of “Lakme Fashion Week” can be seen in all bold letters. Lakme Fashion week is one of the most glamorous events whereby numerous actors/actresses wear designer outfits for a ramp walk. Being the organiser of such events whereby such celebrities participate, gives Lakme credibility—a celebrities’ brand. This also constructs the idea that the lifestyle or product, which is used by infamous people, can also be accessible to the common people.

The alliteration of “r” in the phrase “runway ready radiant...” is used to maintain a flow of words in the mind of the readers. Such alliteration is used to provide a song-like touch to the words. The adjective “radiant” is used tactfully here. “Radiant” means shining or bright and is the opposite of dark; this means that it has been used essentially to further maintain the fascination with something which is not dark but bright and glittering. Aversion to dark and fascination with something which is not dark has been a constant practice in most of the socio-political system ever since colonisation. Gender, along with this, entails a whole spectrum of ideal beauty of a woman in a patriarchal setup. Beauty of a woman is an essential part of a patriarchal society. This entails the presupposition that a situation can arise where a woman must look beautiful like a celebrity or be “runway ready” with “radiant skin”. This ad presupposes the essentialism of external beauty or looks as a part of a woman's social identity. The latter part of the phrase “...with Lakme absolute, perfect radiance” completes the message—in order to look beautiful according to the norms reproduced by this advertisement, you must use “Lakme

absolute”. The bottle also shows that it a “skin brightening serum” which is antonymous to skin darkening. The aversion to dark is a clear stated message here because we see the presence of a relatively fairer skin of the model, the shining background and the white and silver container of the products. It also used scientific vocabulary. The container states that this product comes “with vitaresorcinol” and also claimed its trademark with the letters “™” with it. Advertisers use such scientific marks to claim the legitimacy of effectiveness of their product. Simultaneously, the trademark label shows that if a woman is to use a product for effective results as claimed by the advertisers, she can find it exclusively with this product of Lakme.

This advertisement has the background picture of diamonds surrounded by sparkling rays of light. The colour used here is pink and blue which is used by the advertisers to blend along with the sparkling light and diamonds in the eyes of the readers. The image is presented to match with the catchphrase of this advertisement “absolute perfect radiance”. Besides this background and blend of colours, we see a picture of Kareena Kapoor Khan. The skin tone of her face is relatively fairer than most of the skin tones in India. Placing her face, alongside this product, lures the readers into thinking that the consumers of the product can get as radiant and brightening skin as Kareena Kapoor Khan, if they use this product. The image of Kareena Kapoor is used as a commodity to sell the actual commodity.

Advertisement II: Lakme’s Blush and Glow Face Wash

The following advertisement is of the beauty brand Lakme and features Ananya Pandey, one of the recent actresses of Indian cinema. The beauty product is a face wash.



Fig. 2. Advertisement on Lakme's Blush and Glow Face Wash

This advertisement is a single-liner advertisement. Rhyming is used to give a song-like effect to the advertisement (wash, wash). The phrase literally means that one does not only wash a face with Lakme Blush and Glow face wash, they get "a glow wash". The adverb "just" is used here to make an addition to the quality of this facewash. The positive adjective "glow" is a word which is again tactfully put here like other advertisements of Lakme. The large block font of the latter part of the phrase "...a glow wash" makes it the centre attention of the advertisement. It thus creates and promotes an aversion to dark and dark skin. The synonyms of "glow" are "dull" or "dark". Therefore, it aims to sell a face wash which will give you a face without darkness. Like the previous ad, this ad too uses the tactics of cancelling a discourse (of dark skin) to promote a particular discourse (glowing skin) to sell their products. Beauty brands like Lakme target women as their audience by targeting the pre-existing beauty norms set by the society for women. The need for a plumpy, blushing and glowing skin, according to the patriarchal mindset, is a sign of a healthy and fertile woman. Thus, this face wash gets its name "Lakme Blush & Glow" and a picture of strawberry is printed just below the white note. The

colour of the tube of facewash and the strawberry is red signifying blood rush (blush) as one can see on the cheek bones of Ananya Pandey in this advertisement. Scientific terms like "hydrating" and "Vitamin C Serum" in order to proclaim their authenticity. Advertisers use such language to assure the customers that usage of such products are safe because it is backed up by science. Vitamin C is said to purify blood and thus, the advertisers use that notion to sell their product.

The background of the advertisement is somewhere between peach and peach-pink which blends perfectly with the skin of the model in the picture. The swirling reddish-pink gel in the background of the facewash amalgamates the background, the skin colour and the red packaging of the facewash. The golden colour, starkly different from the rest of the colours, is to signify the "glow" that it claims to provide.

Advertisement III: Garnier's Skin Active

The following advertisement has been taken from Garnier. This advertisement shows a model on the left of the picture. Garnier is one of the leading beauty brands for men and women in India. The product is said to be a daily moisturiser.



Fig. 3. Advertisement on Garnier's Skin Active

The top of the advertisement reads “Garnier Skin Active”. The use of these positive adjectives like “skin active” “clearly brighter”, “brightening” and “smoothing” are mentioned here as solutions that Garnier provides in exchange to the problems that existed before one used this product. The parallelism in “brightening & smoothing” intensifies the meaning of the advertisement. The adjective “active” states that the product effectively (or actively) works on the skin to provide “brighter, smoother skin” within a “week”. The small font lines below the brand’s name states that Garnier is “the active way” to achieve a better skin. This imprints in the mind of the readers that their skin is problematic and a better version of their skin can be attained through the usage of this product. The “better skin” is defined by the advertisers as “brighter, smoother skin”. The word “bright” is antonymous to dark or dull. This advertisement, like several others, works on the idea of an aversion to dark or dull creating a subtle

racist attitude towards those who possess a skin tone relatively different from the one shown in the advertisement. The glorification of anti-dark or fair has been a practice ever since the idea of superiority was associated with the ones who were fair skinned—colonisers.

The female model in the advertisement signifies that the product aims at women as its customers. The caption within the picture of the model “skincare now becomes skinactive” means that the usual skincare routine, up until this product came into being, was flawed and now this regime of skin care is going to help the consumers’ skin actively. The conjunction “becomes” shows transformation of a pre-existing routine into a fruitful one. The background, in terms of colour, has been divided into two parts—white and pale-light blue which sets a tranquil palette for the eyes of the readers. These colours also come in concordance to the positive adjective “brightening & smoothing” mentioned numerous times in the advertising

describing the qualities of the product. In terms of vocabulary, “bright” and synonymous word “radiance” in the form of adjective has been used four times and one time respectively. This also shows that skin care, as claimed by the advertisement may not even be the major function of this advertisement; instead, in the name of skincare, skin brightening is the only motive of the product and the consumers. Scientific terms like “antioxidant”, “Vitamin C” and “lipo-hydroxy acid” are used to validate the claim that this product makes the skin brighter and smoother than usual. Like every ad with such claims, such scientific terms are used by the advertisers to persuade the audience to trust the brand for their skincare.

The latter section of the advertisement states that all these proclamations give “clinically tested proven results”. Scientific terms like “antioxidant”, “Vitamin C” and “lipo-hydroxy acid” are used here to validate the claim that this product makes the skin brighter and smoother than usual. Like every ad with such claims, such scientific terms are used by the advertisers to persuade the audience to trust the brand for their skincare. The claims “actively soothes”, “actively boosts radiance” and “actively protects with SPF 15” are mentioned in bullet points. The idea of activeness in the skincare regime is sold along with this advertisement. With the advent of social media and the bloggers showcasing their five, seven and ten-step skincare routines, the idea of constant skincare always trends and catches the attention of the audience. This advertisement uses that backdrop as its setting to promote the importance of such a moisturiser in the skin care regime.

Conclusion

In the realm of commercial beauty advertisements in India, discourse analysis reveals a complex interplay of language, power dynamics, and societal norms.

These advertisements, being disseminated through various media channels, wield language as a powerful tool to construct and perpetuate beauty standards, often reinforcing patriarchal values, classist and racial biases.

Throughout this discourse analysis, it becomes evident that beauty advertisements are not merely about selling products; they are about selling an idealized image of beauty which is deeply rooted in societal expectations. Advertisers strategically employ linguistic features such as positive adjectives, emotive words, scientific terms, and celebrity endorsements to manipulate consumers into believing that their products hold the key to achieving societal standards of beauty.

The discourse surrounding beauty products often revolves around the notion of “glow,” “radiance,” and “brightening,” which are portrayed as desirable attributes synonymous with success, confidence, and attractiveness. However, beneath the veneer of nourishment and care, lies a subtle reinforcement of discriminatory ideals, such as equating fair skin with beauty and success, thereby perpetuating colorism and racial biases. The idea of fairness rules the discourse of beauty advertisements. Moreover, these advertisements target women as consumers, leveraging societal pressure to conform to narrow beauty standards. By presenting an idealized lifestyle and promoting the idea that external beauty is paramount, advertisers exert control over the perceptions of the audience regarding the product further fostering insecurity and inadequacy to drive sales.

Critical discourse analysis reveals the underlying power structures at play within these advertisements, wherein advertisers wield language to reinforce dominant ideologies and maintain their position of authority. Through meticulous manipulation of linguistic features and visual imagery, advertisers construct a

narrative that equates their products with societal acceptance and success, thereby compelling consumers to aspire to an unattainable standard of beauty. By deconstructing the language and imagery employed in these advertisements, consumers can develop a more nuanced understanding of the underlying messages and resist the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards.

Thus, it can be concluded that commercial beauty advertisements in India serve as a microcosm of larger societal dynamics, wherein language is

employed as a tool of power and persuasion. By critically examining these advertisements through the lens of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, we can uncover the hidden agendas and ideologies perpetuated by advertisers, empowering individuals to challenge societal norms and embrace diverse notions of beauty. Ultimately, fostering a culture of critical engagement with beauty advertisements is essential for promoting inclusivity, diversity, and empowerment in the realm of beauty and beyond.

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