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# A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representations of Females in Printed Advertisements (Case Study of *Payame Yaghoot Medical Health Iranian Journal*)

**Mohammad Hossein Yousefi (Corresponding Author),**
*Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Islamic Azad University of Bonab Branch, Bonab, Iran*
Email: mhh.yousefi@gmail.com

**Farzad Rostami,**
*PhD Candidate in Applied Linguistics, Islamic Azad University of Bonab Branch, Bonab, Iran*
Email: farzadr79@gmail.com

## Abstract

Print advertisements not only directly try to persuade buyers but also indirectly play a role in shaping their social attitude. An interesting area of research that as yet has received little or no attention is the study of the representations of females in magazines with mostly women readers. This study examined print advertisements in local family and health magazine from a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective. It mainly focused on the use of women in advertisements and strategies employed by advertisers to manipulate and influence their customers. The analysis was based on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework. It demonstrated how the ideology of "women's portrait" was produced and reproduced through advertisements in popular local women's magazines. The findings indicated that advertisers used various strategies to take advantages of women. The advertisements promoted an idealized lifestyle and directed readers to a certain extent into believing whatever was advertised was indeed true. This study revealed how the ideologies of beauty and health were constructed and reconstructed through magazines by stereotyping how advertised products were synonymous with a better life. Advertising language was used to control people's minds. Thus people in power (advertisers) used language as a means to exercise control over others.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analyses, Gender Role, Advertisement, Magazine

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## Introduction

The sever contest in attracting likely customers has forced advertisers to employ vigorous advertising strategies and techniques such as, set a problem that can only be solved by using their products. Similarly, cosmetics companies advertise their products to convince women to buy from them and use their products constantly. Magazines are good examples of a powerful media which regularly reach to a large number of women. The Persian Language magazines are constantly flooded with health and beauty product advertisements. Some of them provide quite a lot of information such as, the background of the product, its effectiveness, feedback or testimonies by celebrity's or women who have used the product whereas some are rather short and condensed. These advertisements tend to manipulate readers to a certain extent into believing whatever that is advertised is indeed true.

The social constructions formed by society bring varied ideologies that are constr[ucted and legitimized by the use of language. "Language being the basic tool that constructs these ideologies equally constructs identities of social groups that are gender related" (Filekova, 2011, p. 3). Women being the major consumers of the advertised commodities play a significant role in both promotion of these ideologies and advancement of the advertising industry. The way they are portrayed in advertising in relation to the power they possess in comparison to men is therefore a crucial aspect to be studied.

The main collaborators in advertising are the producers, consumers, and advertising companies. Advertisements arrive to consumers hand through different media such as internet, radio, television, magazines, and newspapers. In order to ascertain that advertisements are capable of reaching the target group, advertisers should take the advantage of various media. For example, if the desired group is the generation Y group, then internet can be the best source as many young people nowadays are connecting to internet when purchasing products such as clothes, gadgets, books, and so on. As print media such as magazines and newspapers can reach both young and old alike, advertisers and manufacturers of products take opportunity to promote their product through this media. Visuals and language in the advertisements play a pertinent role to attract women (Ravikumar, 2012).

Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) conducted a content analysis of 729 ads appearing in eight general interest and news magazines during 1970. They found few women to be employed or work outside the home. Most employed women were entertainers; none were shown in professional or executive roles. This was true of both ads showing women only and those showing men and women together, although the frequency of employed women increased when men and women were shown together. Women were rarely shown interacting with one another. Their conclusion was that stereotypical portrayals of women were dominant.

Cook (2001) points out that advertisements inform, persuade, remind, influence, and perhaps change opinions, emotions, and attitudes. In other words, his contention is that advertisements do not only sell products but change society and make people buy things they do not want or need. He also feels that advertisements do give warnings or information to people. Hence, advertisements can help create awareness, construct identities and attitude.

The "ideal" woman is stereotyped through visual and textual aspects of the advertisements. Advertisers use visual and linguistic means to persuade their audience. It is argued that "advertising is the most influential institution of socialization in modern society" (Jhally, 1995, pp. 79-80). This scenario has brought into perspective on how people who are in control of advertisements manage to exercise their power and at the same time manipulate women's beliefs. Lau and Zuraidah (2010) perceived that advertising has been subtly distorting reality and manipulating consumers to make them buy a way of life as well as goods. Thus studies on advertisements in women's magazines would be of great relevance to advertisers. In order to know how advertisers influence women, it is necessary first to understand what advertising is all about.

Advertisements are important but not many studies have been conducted in the local context from a CDA perspective. Thus there is indeed a need for studies to investigate the use of language and other semiotic modalities in health and beauty products advertisements. The findings of such research efforts can contribute further to the field of advertising as well as language and society.

This study will address the following research questions:

1) What are the linguistic features used in beauty product advertisements?
2) What are the discursive techniques employed in beauty product advertisements to manipulate women?
3) How are women represented in magazine commercials?

**Methodology & Theoretical Framework**

Advertisements are seen as media discourse as they involve language and social processes. Hence this framework is used to show the link between the nature of social practice and the properties of language "texts".

A qualitative design was adopted for this study. It was appropriate in this study which seeks to investigate how discourse in advertisements involves people's construction of meanings. To this end, beauty and health products advertisements in Persian Language local magazines were analyzed. Hence for a descriptive analysis, a qualitative analysis is more appropriate rather than a quantitative analysis. Purposive sampling was done as the study was to investigate only on beauty and health products advertisements where not many studies have been conducted namely face cream, mascara and eye cream, hair care, etc.

Data was collected from local family and health care magazine, *Payame Yaghoot Medical health Iranian Journal* that is published bimonthly from November 2017 to February 2018. Every advertisement on beauty treatment and prevention from these magazines was retrieved and analyzed.

The data analysis is based on Fairclough's (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis framework. Hence this framework is used to show the link between the nature of social practice and the properties of language "texts". His three-dimensional framework includes a conception of discourse as text (micro level), discourse practice (meso level) and sociocultural practice (macro level). Its aim is to explore the relationships among language, ideology, and power and to find out how advertisers persuade the women to buy their products. Thus, this study focused on analyzing the linguistic features of beauty and health products advertisements in family magazine in Iran and highlights how the use of language tends to manipulate women beliefs based on the content of the advertisements.

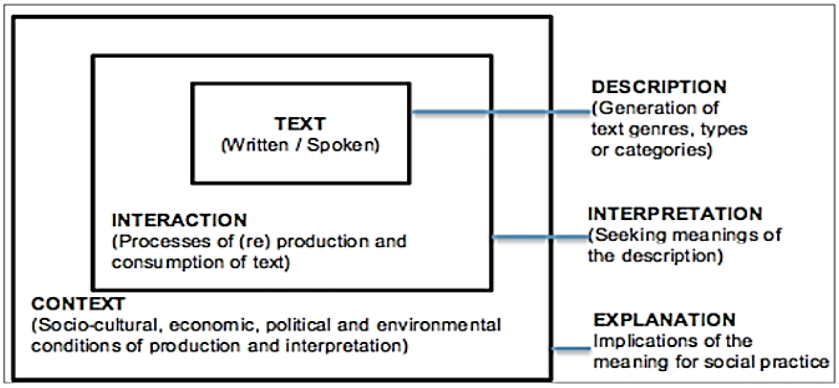



**Fig. 1. Fairclough's (2001) three-dimensional model**

## Text

"The analyses of texts include linguistic analysis in terms of grammar, semantics, the sound system and cohesion-organization above the sentence" (Fairclough, 1995b, p. 57). In a text there are linguistic features and organization of concrete instances of discourse. In determining discourse of a text, description, which is the first step in textual analysis focuses on the linguistic features of the material including verbal or visual materials. The checklist that Fairclough uses is based on Halliday's (1994) Introduction to Functional Grammar.

## Discourse Practice

According to Fairclough (1995b, pp. 58-59), "the discourse practice dimension has two facets: the institutional process (editorial procedures) and the discourse processes (changes the text go through during production and consumption)". Fairclough says "discourse practice straddles the division between society and culture on the one hand

and discourse language and text on the other" (ibid, p. 60). At the discourse practice level, Fairclough (1995b) calls the present linguistic analysis "Intertextual analysis" (p. 61). Intertextual analysis focuses on the borderline between text and discourse practice in the analytical framework. "Intertextual analysis is looking at the text from the perspective of discourse practice, looking at the traces of discourse practice in the text" (Fairclough 1995b, p. 61).

## Sociocultural Practice

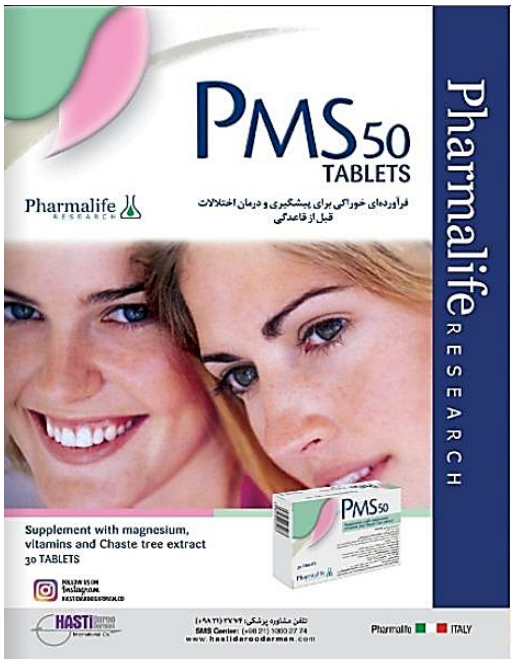
CDA assumes that there is a dialectical relationship between particular discursive events and the situations and social structures that design it, that is, between language and other elements of social life. CDA aims at critically investigating social inequality as it is expressed constituted, legitimized, and so on by language use. As put by Wodak "Most critical discourse analysts would thus endorse Habermas' claim that 'language is also a medium of dominance and social force. It serves to legitimize relations of organized power. Insofar as the legitimization of power relations, are not articulated, language is also ideological'" (Habermas, 1967, p. 259 as cited in Wodak, 1996).

## Results and discussion

The data were collected from three advertisements. They were chosen purposefully based on the need we want to meet. One is for prevention of disorders in women monthly period. The others are about face skin care and hair care and treatment. They are taken from *Payame Yaghoot Medical health Journal* in colorful version.




**Picture 1**




**Picture 2**

**فراورده‌های خوراکی برای پیشگیری و درمان اختلالات قبل از قاعدگی**

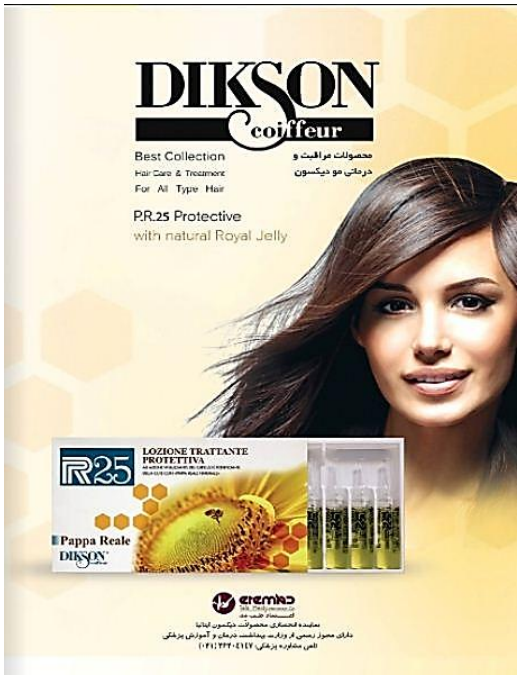
**Translation: Oral products to prevent and treat pre-menstruation disorders**

The strategy to simulate conversational style is the use of disjunctive syntax, that is, sentences without verbs or subjects. This sentence consists of some grammatical items only. Vocabulary is the means for advertisers to express ideological opinions about people and events. "Adjectives are pertinent in advertising as they convey a positive or negative affective meaning" (Delin, 2000, p. 133). Affective meaning will display reader's positive or negative evaluation of an item shown. The advertisements in this study contained adjectives with both positive and negative connotations. The positive adjectives are related to the qualities of the product whereas the negative adjectives are linked to the problems which existed prior to using the products or due to not using the problem.

In *picture 2*, the positive adjective of "oral" highlights a feature that women are convenient with. It is too much better than injections that takes their time a lot. The negative adjective of "disorder" implies the common pain that most of women suffer from. The text moves from negative adjective to positive adjective through the positive verbs of "prevent" and "treatment". There is a parallelism between verbs both in tense of present that convey generality and near synonyms. The type of advertisement is "reason". It tries to persuade – the core job of advertisement – reader to purchase the product.

Advertiser used technical and scientific sounding words to attract readers. By using such words s/he hopes to reflect an image of professionalism and advancement in technology. In order to impress the consumers, advertiser resorted to scientific words and information to create an impression that producers are up-to-date with technology. "PharmalifeRESEARCH" phrase is magnified vertically that is eye-catching to reader and brings life to her through pharmaceutical product. The same phrase is printed on the top right of picture with a semiotic of laboratory bottle that a green drop is falling inside of it. It symbolizes the scientific laboratory work. The green color represents nature friendly product and brings freshness and hope to consumer. The same idea is highlighted in English information – Chaste tree extract – printed at the bottom left of picture. It concerns the women tendency toward organic supplementary by word of "*tree*".

Two women are depicted at the center of advertisement. It indicates that the main concern is about women. Using the product makes them happier. This matter can be reflected through the third dimension of Fairclough's (1992) model namely *Social Practice.* The advertiser is aware of this matter that women are obsessed by looking attractive. So, it makes an effort to remind consumer that pre-menstruation disorders have a negative on their skin. Advertiser is an attempt to show his power in controlling consumer and deceive her to purchase the product to be "in group" rather than out of group.




**Picture 3**

In *picture 3*, the balance among brand logo, woman as consumer, and main ingredient is clear. The reader gets easily involved into picture. It advertises hair protective products. To go through textual analysis as the first dimension of Fairclough's (1992) model; the **DIKSON** brand signifies hair in letter S. the text is not a sentence but a phrase without verb. It starts with positive and superlative adjective 'Best' followed by noun "Collection". The way the positive adjective is used, illustrates the positivity of the product. This will be inserted in the mind of readers which Cook (2001) refers as "'fusion' that will imbue the characterless product with desirable qualities" (p. 108). The words "collection" and "all" are nearly synonyms putting emphasis on availability of all products for all hair types. "Care" and "treatment" are positive nouns that signal the main function of products.

The quality of products was expressed in prepositional phrase "with natural Royal Jelly". Assuming that women are cognizant of worth and usefulness of Royal Jelly; Advertiser demonstrated it in different ways. First, the phrase is printed in color of Royal jelly that is a substance extracted from queen bee. Secondly, it is set as a background of advertisement to ensure consumer that it is chief ingredient in every product. Finally, it is clear in down part of advertisement that a honeybee is flying from a sunflower toward honey hive after feeding from it.

The effect of using these products illustrates in a picture of a women that can be analyzed by means of second dimension of Fairclough (1992) model, Discourse Practice Analysis. The woman is looking at reader, satisfied with applying the products. A breeze is blowing on her face and her hair is wiggling. The advertiser deceitfully magnifies her hair. Hair is so condensed that it made shadow on her face and even the down part of her right ear is dark due to denseness of the hair.

The level of *Social Practice analysis* explains the broad societal currents affecting advertisements. Some women are sometimes misled in believing what is advertised is true. Society seems to value a fair, slim, attractive women more as evident from research. Advertiser evokes feelings of dissatisfaction among consumers themselves as a strategy to stimulate consumers to buy their products to improve their looks and eventually be satisfied as it appears in the woman face in this and others printed advertisements.

## Conclusion

The aim of current study was to investigate how women are portrayed in health and beauty printed advertisements in *Payame Yaghoot Medical health Journal*. It aimed at exploring the ways in which language is employed by the advertisers as a powerful social institution to construct certain realities.

While the analyzed samples selected from the corpus revealed shifts in the use of language, it did not reveal any serious adaptation in the use of visual images, which are such a prominent feature in ads for cosmetic and hygienic products.

The images in the analyzed ads were not adapted to the socio-cultural context of Iran. This is especially surprising if we acknowledge that, "Visual language is not — despite assumptions to the contrary — transparent and universally understood; it is culturally specific" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 4).

Advertisements that appear in magazines show how one should look in order to be acceptable as part of this ideal woman. Technical words in advertisements helps convince the reader that the product is of value. The technical vocabulary reflects expertise which is the source of power. Furthermore, the use of scientific information in the beauty product advertisements reflects authority.

The scientific information or words can be a way to convey expertise, which in other words reflect power.

In this study, advertisers highlight how their products are solutions to women's problems. For instance, by using PMS tablets to prevent menstruation disorders. Based on the data analysis, it can be summarized that the most obvious theme in the advertisements is the ideal appearance or look for women. Advertisers use various strategies to manipulate women to purchase their product. Their positive self-representation is evident when they claim their product provide benefits. The advertisers have the means to promote ideal standards of beauty. Women, the main consumers of beauty products consciously or subconsciously are coaxed into buying the products advertised. Thus it seems it is not easy to ignore the persuasive nature of advertisements. They shape ideas of what it means to be a woman in our society. Fill (2002) believes advertisements can influence consumers to purchase a product that they have never used before. They urge women to care for their appearance by recommending products that could help achieve a perfect complexion.

It cannot be denied that appearance can affect a women's social or career success in life. Riji (2006) agrees that physical appearance for women is heavily subjected to social judgments. Although some people may believe that advertisements are not significant or have no effect on their values, this is far from true. Language is a powerful tool which can shape people. People communicate through language. Magazines just like other media portray a great impact on readers as Fairclough and Graham (2002, p. 47) aptly states that "this is due to the complexity of the media discourse which presents different ideological processes. In short, advertisers manipulate women into buying a way of life".

**Future Research Considerations**

Future research can be conducted on other Persian women's magazines in Iran. In addition, analysis of advertisements from other media such as internet and television can be undertaken. The advertisements analyzed in this study involve only three beauty products namely caviar and gold, PMS50, and Dikson. Thus, future research may include other beauty products as well as a bigger sample size. Apart from this,

future studies need to consider a semiotic analysis of beauty product advertisements in local context. Moreover other studies can be done on gender role in other products like home appliances or clothes.

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## Authors' Biography



**Mohammad Hossein Yousefi** is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at Islamic Azad University of Bonab Branch, Bonab, Iran. His main areas of research interest include Teacher Education, Second Language Acquisition, and Task-Based Language Teaching. He has a number of publications in national and international journals



**Farzad Rostami** is a PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at Islamic Azad University of Bonab Branch, Bonab, Iran. His main areas of research interest include Teacher Education, Second Language Acquisition, and Discourse. He has a few number of publications in national and international journals and has attended some national and international conferences as well