

FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO THE LANGUAGE USE AND DISPLAY IN WHITENING COSMETIC PRODUCT ADVERTISEMENTS

Melania Priska Mendrofa

Prayoga School of Foreign Language (STBA Prayoga)

melania@stba-prayoga.ac.id

Received: 11 May 2020

Accepted: 6 July 2020

Abstract

The language used in advertisements can reflect social and cultural perspectives. Specific words and sentences used by a cosmetic company can attract consumers to buy and consume a product. The language can also change people's perspective about life and the way they experience it. Cosmetic products have changed women's perspective toward the standard of beauty. The beauty standard is submitted through the persuasive language and the display of beautiful models in the advertisements. It is a common issue that the concept of being a beautiful woman is to have white and glowing skin. Because of this, women buy and use many whitening products to beautify themselves. The language of advertisement 'colonizes' women and kills the concept of a woman's nature. It subordinates some women who keep their natural looks by not using any whitening products. However, women should be aware of this problem and not be affected by the language of advertisement so that they can accept themselves for who they are. Feminist critical discourse analysis helps this research to analyze and criticize the beauty standard that has been imposed on women through the language. In the end, women's awareness is needed to resist the beauty standard as a gender stereotype constructed by society.

Keywords: Feminist critical discourse analysis, the language of advertisement, whitening cosmetic product

INTRODUCTION

Language does not only function as the media of information, but it can allow people to do things (Gee, 2011). It persuades people and changes their perspective about something. As it is in whitening cosmetic product advertisements, the persuasive words strongly influence women to change their appearance to look more beautiful. Women have become so occupied beautifying themselves. They become a target for the cosmetic market that 'creates' beautiful women

with a certain standard: to have white and glowing skin. A lot of whitening cosmetic product industries are growing fast around the world. They become bigger and bigger with the help of mass media, especially through advertisements. In Indonesia, the cosmetic advertisements usually show attractive models and words that are persuasive to women. Indonesian women generally want to have white skin like western people. Colonialization has changed the Indonesians' way of thinking. They think that white people are better than Indonesians. Their skin, eyes and hair color are perceived to be much more beautiful than Indonesians. Therefore, today women want to have a perfect look: to have white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes.

Feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA), as can be seen from its political perspective on gender, involves the critique of the interrelationship of gender, power, and ideology in discourse (Lazar, 2005). According to Fairclough (2003), discourse is part of social action because it consists of writing and speaking which reflect both acting and interacting. It implies that words can become media of interaction between the actor and the target, that is, between companies and consumers. Words which are presented in writing can inform things and also persuade people. In whitening cosmetic product advertisements, the persuasive language used by the companies marginalizes and puts gender stereotype on women, indoctrinating the idea that women have to be pretty. Thus, feminist CDA seeks to criticize the power of language as the reflection of social oppression toward women's natural looks.

In advertisements, there is a problem-solution relation indicated in the sentences (Fairclough, 2003). The text deals with customers' problems first, including their needs and desire, before providing a solution through the products offered. The text is also rich in meaning. It does not only contain letters but also semiotic modalities, such as visual images, layouts, gestures, and sounds (Lazar, 2005). There will be different strategic and communicative actions used by the advertisement companies to attract consumers' attention. The authors have the authority to create stories and to present women as either the subject or the object of oppression. So, the authors, or the cosmetic companies, make use of the female language. It uses some words related to women's beauty to attract their attention. It is as if the language used by those companies is women's voice that speaks to other persons of the same gender, so that they can be influenced through its persuasion.

Meanwhile, it is reflected from the language of advertisement that a woman's body is not seen as a natural entity, but as a social construction (Davis et al., 2006). A problem arises when a woman is forced to have a good physical appearance rather than rational thought and skill. Because of social construction, women try to improve their looks to get social approval through medical interventions. Medical treatments, such as the use of whitening cosmetic products, help women to be a perfect figure in society.

However, women have different types of body maintenance. Since westernization gained dominance, body maintenance has seemed to be universal. The use of cosmetics, hair removal, and hairstyling, for instance, have become a daily activity for western women, and it becomes unacceptable if they do not do it (Davis et al., 2006). This condition creates a stigma that women must have perfect body appearances. They should keep their physical appearances. Being hairy for women is even seen as being lazy, dirty and unattractive. Through feminist critical discourse analysis, men's privilege can be resisted. Critical discourse analysis then becomes a part of an emancipatory critical social science to achieve social order through a critique of discourse (Lazar, 2005). It is to resist the disempowerment of women in discourse. Lazar (2005) also explains that the focus of feminist CDA is on how gender ideology and gendered relations of power are (re)produced, negotiated and contested in representations of social practices, in social relationships between people, and people's social and personal identities in texts and talk.

So, text analysis can reveal the marginalization of women's natural looks. It presents how the patriarchy or society still dominates women through the role of language.

METHODS

Research Design

This research applies a descriptive qualitative method to explore and describe the use of persuasive language and display in whitening cosmetic product advertisements. The analysis of this research shows the discussion of the social problem, which is the use of persuasive language in constructing the beauty standard for women. To support the analysis, the writer uses a sociological approach. According to Saukko (2003) the function of the sociological approach is to clarify the empowering and disempowering aspects of discourses both from personal as well as social points of view. It helps the writer analyze the social phenomenon, namely the influence of whitening cosmetic product's language for women's beauty standards.

Data collection

The researcher looked for three famous whitening cosmetic product advertisements from the internet (POND'S, GARNIER, and L'OREAL) that use good persuasive words for beauty and show a flawless-skinned woman as their model. The researcher chose those western brands to show how the companies set the beauty standard based on western standards and hired the flawless-skinned Asian models and actresses to be their brand ambassadors for their products and to prove the effectiveness of the products for Asians' skin type.

Data analysis

Feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) was utilized to analyze the disempowerment of women through the discourse. In the beginning, the researcher reconstructed the background and impact of language use in whitening cosmetic products. Secondly, the problem was identified, and the research question was formulated. Later, the writer identified the theory that was used for analyzing the data, namely feminist CDA.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Feminist critical discourse analysis to the language use and display in whitening cosmetic product advertisements

This research focused on the analysis of the three whitening cosmetic product advertisements below:



Figure 1. POND'S advertisement. Adapted from POND'S white beauty face wash - Radio [Video file], by Umrigar, K., 2012, Retrieved March 5, 2020, from <https://youtu.be/bjWlxv3h0U0>.



Figure 2. GARNIER advertisement. Adapted from Review Garnier BB Cream, Retrieved March 5, 2020, from <https://www.sweetsharing.com/review-garnier-bb-cream/amp/>



Figure 3. L'OREAL advertisement. Adapted from Skin care L'OREAL PARIS, Retrieved March 5, 2020, from <https://www.lorealparis.com.my/products/skin-care>

The three advertisements (ads) used language to build a topic. The language defined and produced knowledge to the objects, in this case, the cosmetics products. The language directed the way how the products were discussed meaningfully and rationally. The language influenced how an idea was practiced and used to manage behavior, in this case, the consumers' behavior. The sentences used in the whitening cosmetic product advertisements (POND'S, GARNIER, and L'OREAL) are in the form of active voice. The words used were mostly verbs and adjectives. The verbs were *increase, value, switch to, get, celebrate, fade out, and even out*. The adjectives were *fairer, soft, perfect and glowing*. The positive and attractive choice of verbs and adjectives strengthened the quality of the products. They used verbs to describe the benefits of the products, and adjectives to convince women to buy the products for their quality (soft) and the result (they can make women's faces *fairer, perfect and glowing*). They set the perspective that the products were effective to create the perfect condition of the skin. The actor in the active sentences was not presented directly. Therefore, who is and what is being communicated in the language were not explicitly stated (Gee, 2011). As shown in Figure 1, it was the company that spoke to the consumers through the use of persuasive language in order to attract women's attention to buy and use their product; *If you value your face, should you be washing it with soap? Switch to Pond's White Beauty Facewash with 50% white cream actives and get fairer skin right from the first wash.*

The company also tried to put attention to women's skin through their advice to use POND'S White Beauty Facewash instead of common soap. The advice was also supported by providing the result of using the whitening product even from the first use; *get fairer skin right from the first wash*. The sentence, *Unlike soap, it's soft on your face too*, shows the strong quality of POND'S compared to common soap. Being similar to POND'S advertisement, GARNIER and L'OREAL also presented the same purpose, that was, to invite women to leave their old appearances, to lose the dark spots and celebrate the new skin perfection. The advertisements promised the consumers the skin perfection as what it was expressed by the models of the three ads through their flawless and light skinned faces.

Next, the three advertisements explained the benefits of their products without mentioning the target. However, their representation of a woman's image implicitly showed the target readers the image of an ideal woman. The advertisements placed POND'S, GARNIER and L'OREAL as high-quality cosmetic products. Therefore, they did not directly invite the consumers to buy their products. It was an indirect invitation from the use of persuasive languages. The L'OREAL White Perfect used the phrase *Dermatologically Tested- Tested on Asian skin* in the last line to strengthen the quality of the product which means that it was made using in-depth research and high technological equipment. The result was also listed there: it was tested on Asian skin. Those words gave the impression that L'OREAL was a modern and sophisticated company with reliable dermatologists. GARNIER also presented the Asian model, the Indian woman, to prove the effectiveness of the product. It was aimed at the Asians to show the effectiveness of the product for the Asian skin type, which is a relatively darker one, to be made more glowing. The use of 'you' in the POND'S ad showed the interpersonal function of the sentence. It convinced the customers to buy their product by asking them about their old habits and then persuaded them to leave it. The phrases 'dark out, white in', 'Increase your face value', indicated that having a fairer white face will make a woman more beautiful and admirable. The last line, 'Give your face the value it deserves', implied that a non-white face is not valuable and uninteresting. A white face was much better. As Figure 3 shows, the first line phrase, *Glowing skin in 5 days* could describe that you can get beauty instantly. Beauty was when your skin was free from dark spots. The use of women's images in the ads also indicated that women were the

icons of beauty. As the icons of beauty, these women should have white and smooth skin. White and smooth skin was considered as the superior kind of skin; skin that based on these three ads must be owned by all women.

These three ads also tried to create their own truth through the language. According to Foucault (1990), based on the principle of exteriority, there is a hidden game of power relations behind the language. He said that power relations are both intentional and non-subjective. No power is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power. Thus, the three ads must have certain aims and objectives. The three ads aimed to put power on women and society. The power is used to change the beauty concept of women and marginalized those who are not included in that concept.

From the analysis of the advertisements' language above, it reflected the representation of women as the subject of beauty. It constructed a mindset for women that they could have beautiful and fair skin if they used certain whitening products and cream. This mindset was easily used by the companies since the stereotype of becoming a beautiful woman has been constructed repeatedly and many times before. Women get pressured by society to be attractive so they can be rewarded with marriage and motherhood (Denmark & Paludi, 2008). Thus, women seem to be in the race to look attractive. It is the society that even put feminine characteristics in a girl's toy (Denmark & Paludi, 2008). The cosmetic companies provided a 'toy', that is the whitening cosmetic products, with all of the feminine language so that the women can be persuaded to use the products. This condition made women dream of having beautiful skin, and that was when cosmetic products took advantage of it.

Meanwhile, this condition has been criticized by feminists who want to subvert the social construction for women. The concept of having a beautiful face, white, fair, and bright skin as the physical appearance should be eliminated. It is paradoxical if the physical appearance becomes the determination of women's identity. The whitening cosmetic products above were not specified for women of certain ages. It was for women of all ages. From this situation, it can be inferred that the aged women should also possess a perfect look or physical appearance. The social views about the beauty standard have made middle-aged women dissatisfied with their appearance (Denmark & Paludi, 2008). Based on this social phenomenon, the cosmetic company arranges good persuasive language to convince the all-age women to have flawless beauty. Women got brain-washed by the companies' advertisements so that they prioritize physical appearance over their skill.

So, persuasive language changes women's mind and behavior. It affects women's appreciation for their bodies. Along with the cosmetic product advertisements, there will be a question toward the construction of womanhood. It is the power of society in constructing a woman's standard of beauty that can kill the essential meaning of being a woman. A woman is no longer appreciated because of their ability and skill, but due to their physical appearances only. For this condition, women should have an awareness of their bodies. There must be appreciation too from society toward women's natural looks. Gender stereotype of what looks beautiful and perfect for women should be dismissed eventually.

CONCLUSION

From the three advertisements, it can be concluded that the idea of being white or having fair skin is a kind of social construction. There is a hegemony that has presented white women as the most beautiful people. The language used in the advertisements has the power to change people

especially women's way of thinking. Language can create power which makes people shift their mindset and stay under hegemony and gender stereotype unconsciously.

REFERENCES

- Davis, K., Evans, M., & Lorber, J. (2006). *Handbook of gender and women's studies* (Ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Denmark, F. L. & Paludi, M.A. (2008). *Psychology of women: A handbook of issues and theories* (2nd Ed.). London: Praeger.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality. Volume I: An introduction*. New York: Vintage Books A Division of Random House, Inc.
- Gee, J.P. (2011). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (3rd Ed.). NY: Routledge.
- Lazar, M.M. (2005). *Feminist critical discourse analysis: Gender, power, and ideology in discourse* (Ed.). NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Review Garnier BB Cream [Online Image]. Whitening product. <https://www.sweetsharing.com/review-garnier-bb-cream/amp/>
- Saukko, P. (2003). *Doing research in cultural studies: An introduction to classical and new methodological approaches*. London: Sage Publications.
- Skin care L'OREAL PARIS [Online Image]. Whitening product. <https://www.lorealparis.com.my/products/skin-care>
- Umrigar, K. (2012, October 21). Pond's white beauty face wash - Radio [Video file]. Youtube. <https://youtu.be/bjWlxv3h0U0>

