Portrayal of Women in Cosmetic Advertisement:
A Critical Discourse Study

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Abstract

Cosmetic advertisements have almost always been synonymous with women being objectified. They are portrayed in different forms for audience attention as well as attraction. It is obvious that this portrayal is in accordance to the prevailing socio cultural conditions of the target audience. In India, the society has been rapidly changing; emergence of a growing middle class has brought in a totally new culture hitherto unknown to the Indian masses. So, has the cosmetic advertisements portraying women changed over time. At each point of time, the advertisement is made to appeal the target audience through different modes. In the current study, we seek to analyse how and what strategies are employed by the advertisers to connect with the masses. The approach we use is Critical Discourse Study, within which we use Teun A. van Dijk's Sociocognitive model (van Dijk, 2015). The model is beneficial in analyzing text with respect to the prevailing socio cultural conditions as well as the cognitive models of the target audience and the advertisers. Through the analysis, we seek to study if there is a change in the perceived identity and roles of women in society. An attempt is also made to study what modes other than words are used to portray women in a specific way and thus, appeal to the target audience and who actually form this target audience. We use a comparative study of two advertisements by Lakme, endorsing foundation. The two advertisements relate to two different times.

Keywords: Portrayal of women, advertisements, Critical discourse Analysis, Sociocognitive model.

Introduction

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Advertising refers to the communication between the producer and the consumer of products. Typically, the producers are the businesses that need to promote and thus, achieve higher sale of their products. Consumers are the masses that buy and use these products. Between them is the advertising agency that makes advertisements lucrative so that it appeals and attracts, at the same time convincing, the consumers towards the promoted product or service. It is believed that women are used as easy objects for the aforementioned purpose. Nonetheless, along with/apart from women there are a number of modes that are explicitly/implicitly designed to catch the reader attention. At the same time, these modes can be analysed to study what kind of audience is being targeted and how.

In the present paper, we focus on cosmetic advertisement. Cosmetics can be defined as any product that is supposed to improve appearance on its application. The desire to look good and attractive can be presumed to be an innate desire, more so in women (Grogan, 2008). Therefore, there is a range of female beauty products in the market. Interestingly, in order to gain higher buyership, advertisements resort to telling women that they need to improve in terms of looks!

Globalisation and Cultural Needs
Globalization coupled with widespread corporate sector has led to an unprecedented growth of the middle class. It comprises of the working population with a different set of needs and preferences. There is a dearth of time and women now need and prefer products that are handy and lasting. The new office culture promotes a natural and perfect look. Women have received a boost in confidence as they become independent. They know their needs better and are more inclined towards customization than following, rather imitating, the so called standard. Advertisers seem to minutely understand the shift in culture. As a result, the promotional advertisements seem to precisely address the newly found needs and preferences.

Earlier, advertisements were a sort of celebrity endorsement campaigns. Celebrities were portrayed as some standard that people should aim to achieve (Apejoye, 2003). Portrayal can be defined as the process of depicting someone/something in a dramatic fashion through speech, gesture or other modes. Women were supposed to imitate the standard set by these celebrities (Kuldip et al, 2018). They were encouraged to shine like them once in a while. Clearly, the daily need of looking perfect did not exist.

In this paper, we try to analyse and thus proof/disproof the points mentioned above. We take two advertisements promoting Lakme foundation. They belong to two different times. We attempt to analyse what identity and roles of women are assumed and addressed. Also, we aim to evaluate if such portrayals can have a long term impact on the target audience in terms of the identity and roles assigned to them.

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What is CDA/CDS?

CDA seeks to "effectively study relevant social problems, such as those of sexism, racism, colonialism and other forms of social inequality" (van Dijk, 1995) as well as the differential power equations existing in the society. It is interesting to note that CDA is no method/methodology. It is rather a perspective or attitude (van Dijk, 2015) that uses a multidisciplinary approach and thus, methods from different areas of humanities and social sciences. In regard to this particular approach, van Dijk uses the term Critical Discourse Study (CDS). In this paper, henceforth we would be using CDS. CDS seeks to explain how language is involved in the process of power creation and maintenance and how hegemonic attitudes are propagated.

Locke (2004) describes the three terms separately. Discourse, according to him, is language in use. Fairclough (2003) states language with a particular viewpoint is discourse. For instance, a mother giving fruits to the boy and not being able to give to the girl can be interpreted as (1) girl being denied equal status—feminist discourse (2) poor economic condition of the family—socio economic discourse. It is believed in CDS research that discourse is not just representative of the society it is produced in. It is also an instance of signification which affects the cognition of people.

Critical means taking nothing as neutral (Hasnain, 2012). A critical approach tends to problematize everything questioning its creation as well as its effect on the society. Likewise, CDA seeks to find out effects a particular discourse has on society. If there is no contestation to the effect a discourse has on cognition, the effect in due course of time becomes ideology. This ideology controls further (re)production of that discourse. This is the process how a given discourse becomes naturalized.

Being Analytical means a detailed systematic examination with an intention to derive at the underlying meanings.
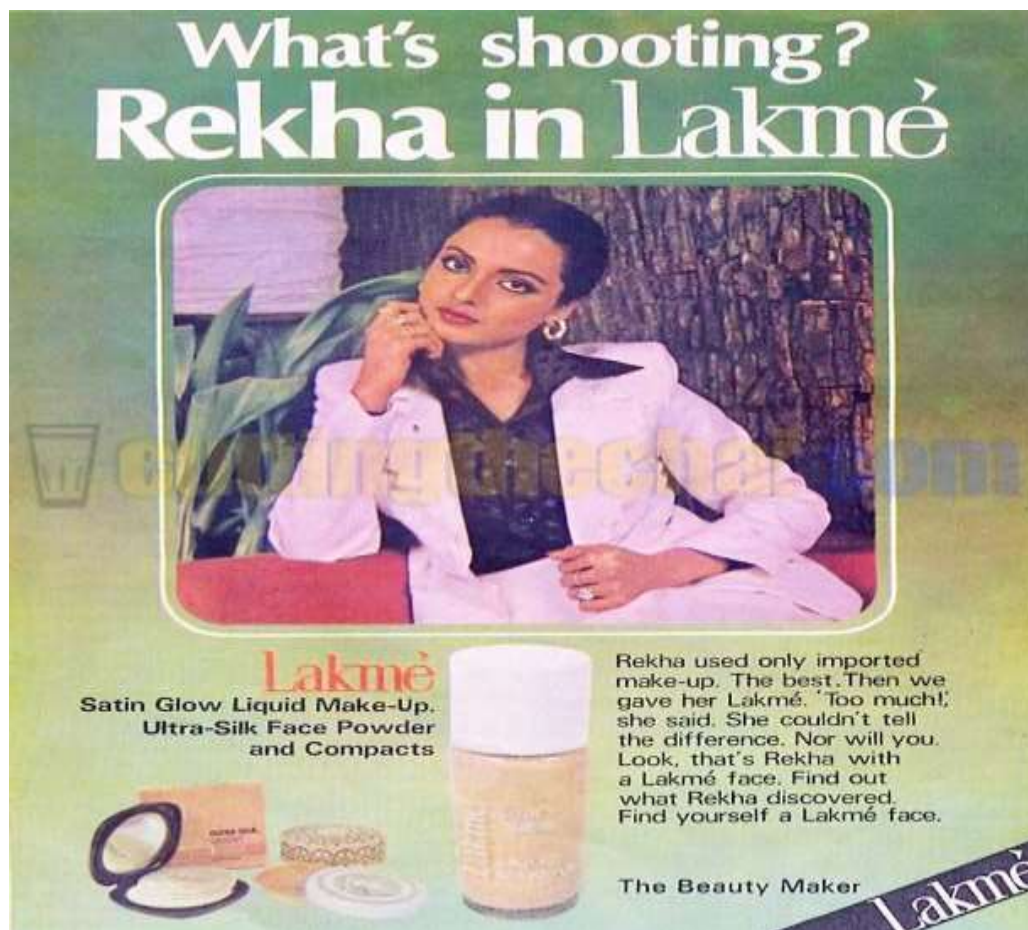
What Is the Sociocognitive Model?

Van Dijk presents a triangle of discourse (text and talk), mind and society. The component of mind (or memory) takes a central position in this model. Memory is divided into Working Memory (WM)/ Short Term Memory (STM). It is the area where the ongoing experiences are continuously processed. The other component is the Long Term Memory (LTM) which in turn is made up of Episodic Memory (EM) and Semantic Memory (SM). EM is the area where knowledge about the personal/autobiographical experiences are stored. SM stores the social cognition, that is, knowledge shared by the social community we live in. It comprises of social attitudes, knowledge and ideology. This component is the most crucial in studying how group attitudes can be manipulated by covertly appealing to the ideology.

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Whenever we encounter a new experience, it is processed in light of the knowledge already stored in the EM and SM. The new knowledge gained becomes part of the EM, if it is of personal nature, and becomes part of the SM, if it is of social nature. Once this knowledge is integrated in the system of LTM, it gains power to influence further perception of experiences. The most striking part is that knowledge in the LTM becomes a naturalised discourse, that is, it becomes something naturally occurring or given and is thus, almost never questioned. It requires immense effort and struggle to realise the working of this ideological knowledge and even greater effort and struggle to amend its unethical usage. Thus, it is of utmost importance to study and disseminate information about how minds can be captured, and opinions manufactured so much so that it is hardly ever perceptible. The language of advertising is a powerful example of such capturing of ideology. This is because it uses crisp, pithy and often melodious language. Keiko Tanak appoints out that language in advertisements often use eye catching puns which tend to stay longer in memory.

Knowledge in EM is stored in the form of mental models. These are a hierarchical structure of spatiotemporal nature. These mental models are multimodal, that is, they have information not just in terms of language but also other modes of expression.

The next major component of the model is the social component. It mainly deals with the notion of power. Power is defined as the phenomenon of control, when one mass of population controls the other mass of population. Power can be overt when the actions are controlled. This is the Social Dimension of power. Or, it can be covert when it controls the mind, ideology and mental models. This is the Cognitive Dimension of power. A population can become powerful when it has a privileged access to resources of discourse formation. For instance, producers of advertisements are powerful for they have access to producing a definitive discourse that would ultimately benefit them. What we seek in this paper is to study in what way the power is exerted by this powerful mass on the general population, here the consumers of advertisements.

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What's shooting?
Rekha in Lakmé

Lakmé
Satin Glow Liquid Make-Up.
Ultra-Silk Face Powder
and Compacts

Rekha used only imported make-up. The best. Then we gave her Lakmé. 'Too much!' she said. She couldn't tell the difference. Nor will you. Look, that's Rekha with a Lakmé face. Find out what Rekha discovered. Find yourself a Lakmé face.

The Beauty Maker   Lakmé

Discursive Analysis of Advertisement 1
Language

In the given advertisement, the most noticeable aspect is too much text and the relative non fluidity of each mode with the theme. In the very first instance, the producer assumes the reader has time to go through so much text and the detailed experience of Rekha, even her replies verbatim! The very first part is dialogic asking a question. It automatically assigns the reader a subject position where they presumably answer (may be unconsciously accepting) 'Rekha in Lakme'. According to Fairclough, assigning subject position is a way of establishing and stabilizing a particular discourse type. The term 'lakme' is repeated thrice in different fonts, colours and backgrounds, reifying its importance. Words like 'satin glow' and 'ultra silk' clearly indicates the advertisement is for ladies and for special occasions where one needs to shine like satin and silk. In the description of Rekha's experience, imperative constructions are used like "Look that's Rekha with a Lakme face, Find out…, find out yourself". Such constructions are either command or request. In both the cases, the reader is asked to do something that is in favour of the text producer. Therefore, the text producer automatically assumes a powerful position and relegates the reader to a specified subject position. Lastly, the products are called 'THE BEAUTY

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MAKER'. Thus, they are assigned power the standard of which is 'Rekha in Lakme'. Reiteration of 'lakme face' reemphasises it is an entity that women out there need to possess for this is 'what is shooting'.

Layout

Various elements of the advertisement seem to have been brought together and dropped in one background. The picture of Rekha occupies, quite meaningfully, the central position of the advertisement. It becomes very clear what the real agenda of the ad is. The products that should have been the theme are relegated to the downside of the whole text. There are two products advertised in one commercial. Indeed, no specialization in the choice of product is assumed except for the coveted celebrity look. The products are not highlighted, like Rekha's portrait, with a white outline. There is text scattered in all corners. The most important and meaningful text comes at the top. It reifies what the central portrait of the celebrity tends to hint. In her portrait, Rekha does not sit in a formal posture, but can be noticed giving an attractive pose. She sits in a formal dress. However, her jeweled image speaks of a special occasion. She looks straight into the camera, which is a mark of confidence, probably because now she has a 'lakme face'.

Colour

The background is green in colour that invites a soothing feeling of peace and calm. The text is mostly in black and white. Rekha too wears black and white. This may be an attempt to create a classic look. Also, black in itself indicates confidence, robustness, strength. White, on the contrary, white is a marker of simplicity, innocence and peace. The combination can be vividly described with the system of Rekha's clothing. She is confident from inside but simple on the outside.

Social and Cognitive Analysis of Advertisement 1

The advertisement looks and reads more like a celebrity endorsement activity. Indeed, Lakme would not endorse a celebrity unless she brings profit to them. Hence, the two are placed in association, eg. 'Rekha in Lakme'. The two most striking components of the ad are the first two sentence dialogue and the portrait of Rekha. Both reemphasise each other. Rekha is given a powerful central position and all texts along with the products sit around her. Use of imperatives gives power to the discourse producer.

Nowhere do the elements speak of a woman's identity and what she wants. She is instead encouraged to discover what the, here powerful, celebrity experienced. Clearly, the advertisement is designed to appeal to women at home who sometimes want to shine in special occasions. This is indicated by the rarely used satin and silk as well as jewelry. The identity of woman is spoken about only till the point she is beautiful like the 'lakme face' for Lakme is the 'beauty maker'.

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Too much text indicates it is assumed women have time to invest. Beyond doubt, women are not considered working individuals. Moreover, there is just one shade shown of the foundation as well as the compact. It is implicitly implied beauty cannot be dark.

If these pieces of implicit knowledge are accepted without contestation, they form part of the LTM. Thus, they now have the power to generate mental models which assumes women as non-working, once-in-a-while shining people who have too much time to invest in beauty products and look like a celebrity! At this point, this implicit knowledge becomes dangerous for it will influence future perception of events. Also, it helps stabilize and ideology of celebrity worship. Based on this ideology is the attitude to look someone you are not. Therefore, in the long run, in the socially generalized meaning, someone with a standard complexion, pose and looks only can be beautiful.

Discursive Analysis of Advertisement 2
Language

This advertisement has minimum text. Nonetheless, it is a powerful composition. The term 'effortless product' creates a mental model where the person requiring it is in dearth of time. 'easily blends into your skin' indicates the product is something that adjusts to you. You do not put in effort as it is customized according to your needs. What are these needs supposed to be? Why are there these needs? It 'lasts throughout the day' this same quality is stated with '9 to 5' written on the product. The target audience is either the office going or the college going women.

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Lastly, it 'conceals imperfections'. What are these imperfections? The advertiser telling someone of their imperfections assumes a powerful position where it points finger and the reader is relegated to a subject position of obeying to 'conceal' them.

The foundation is 'weightless' and comes in a range of different shades. Different shades can be interpreted as giving women a strong image. They know what exactly they want and so the product is customized in different shades.

Layout

This advertisement is a carefully crafted composition. It has minimum text but all elements flow into each other, creating a powerful impact of the theme on the cognition of readers. The background is white, and all elements are placed on it without any extra highlighting (as in the case of Rekha's portrait in the last advertisement). Nonetheless, the celebrity occupies a major position on the left. English readers tend to focus on the left first and thus, remember it. The celebrity gives a close up with a straight-into-the-eye look. There is, therefore, no focus on her celebrity status but the texture and quality of her skin. She wears a very simple nude makeup. The advertisement definitely does not talk about special occasions (as in the case of jeweled Rekha and her attractive pose). The product is also given a central position. There is just the text highlighting its concrete quality, there is no unnecessary aggrandizement. The product itself speaks of its 'weightlessness'. Lastly, the text occupies the top position. Although less, it is given an important position. There are higher chances that it would be read as well as remembered.

There are just three elements used. Each of them is given an important position; none suffers at the expense of others. Each of them is directly linked to the theme and concretely yet implicitly effects the cognition.

Colour

Colours used are the major resource of creating the created impact. Every element is in a nude shade. There are two effects of it: 1. It can masterfully 'conceal imperfections' 2. It highlights the nude shades available in the product. It should be noticed that all shades of the foundation mentioned create a psychological impact of strength and dependableness.

Social and Cognitive Analysis of Advertisement 2

The advertisement evidently assumes the addressees to be working women. These women lack time and thus, need effortless products. Also, it is assumed that in their tight schedule these women need something that 'blends' with their schedule. Working women need something that lasts for the day and so is done by the advertised product. However, it is to be understood that the advertiser takes up the powerful position because the working women are in need of some thing.

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Secondly, the text overtly tells women that there are 'imperfections' they need to 'conceal'. Ethically, no one has the right or should have the power to state what counts as imperfections. More unethical is to ask someone to conceal them.

One positive side of the advertisement is that it acknowledges a strong and independent identity of women. They are presumed to be educated people who are aware of the subtleties of their cosmetic needs. They know how to choose what shade according to their skin tone. All shades of colours used emphasise this strong image of women and how the product is in accordance to this image. However, one shortcoming is that all shades are nude. What about the needs of a dark skin?

The advertisement may appeal to the working, strong women as a specially customized product. However, its underlying assumption of power relegates women to the subject position. In case, she accepts the theme being conveyed multimodally, her LTM is affected. In future too, she would produce mental models that tell her that she needs to look flawless for the whole day. She has issues that society categorises as 'imperfections' and so she needs to conceal them with the product best suiting her skin tone.

Conclusion

Both advertisements have been quite suggestive and vivid. They addressed women identity and roles according to the times they were produced in. The new advertisement did acknowledge the independence and strength of women. Nonetheless, both advertisements implied that women need to either be like someone or at least conceal their 'imperfections'. The continuous growth and sale of beauty products indicate that such regressive discourse has found a connect with the audience's ideology. Van Dijk (2008) says "ideologies are largely (re)produced by text, talk and communication". Women do feel the need to look flawless and thus, to try on cosmetics that make them naturally perfect!

We, therefore, feel there is a need of a new paradigm of research. It should not only analyse advertiser strategies, but also study if it is possible to attract audience with the same intensity if such a regressive discourse is completely avoided. Moreover, strategies could be suggested that can catch audience attention by only addressing the strength of their identity.

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