



Female identities in TV toiletries ads: A pragmatic and multimodal analysis of implied meanings

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ABSTRACT

The main thrust of this paper is to unveil the female identities embodied in a corpus of TV toiletries ads through a pragmatic and multimodal description of the most recurrent thematic cores touched upon in the ads. These thematic cores have been arrived at through an analysis of the implied meanings conveyed about women and the product/brand advertised, together with their classification into topical emerging categories. In order to test the validity of such topical themes, a group of 8 female informants expressed their level of agreement (5-point Likert scale) with a list of implied meanings for each of the ads analysed. Findings reveal that the TV ads construct female identities around two main recurrent thematic cores: (i) women's sexual and beauty empowerment and (ii) women's ability to overcome inner emotional struggles about ageing or confidence loss. Both thematic cores tap into stereotypical views that urge women to be and stay beautiful through the consumption of the products. Female participants are also reminded of their self-worth as women and urged to redefine beauty standards as ways of empowering them to feel good about their looks and of regaining self-esteem. Although verbal stimuli are key for the recovery of implied assumptions, visual and, to a lesser extent, auditory stimuli have been found to reinforce what is verbally implied and to aid in the transmission of weak implicatures about the female participants depicted in the ads under analysis in this piece of research.

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1. Introduction

The ubiquitous activity of advertising is not only about a product or commodity or about how a product can help us; rather, advertisements quite often imply that we will acquire the lifestyle, glamour or physical properties of the represented participants in the ads. Not in vain, advertising very often creates such powerful structures of meaning that it has been said to replace those traditionally fulfilled by art or religion (Williamson, 2002). As a manipulative agent (Pollay, 1986), the discourse of advertising constitutes a suitable *locus* where social and gender identities are created, revised, accepted, and perpetuated thanks to their constant portrayal of images of men and women who are perceived by audiences as representative of the whole population.

Research with a focus on gender and advertising has been prolific—especially in the area of gender stereotypes. Results indicate that both men and women are represented in a stereotyped fashion (cf. Knoll et al., 2011; Patterson et al., 2009) and

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that women are overwhelmingly underrepresented on television, with the last two decades of research showing just a small increase in their presence in comparison to their visibility in society (cf. Collins, 2011; Daalmans and Horst, 2017; Segijn et al., 2014). On the other hand, female imagery and women's presence has been intimately linked to the selling of certain product types, such as home and cleaning items—in which women act as product endorsers, housewives or domestic managers—or to beauty products (cf. Craig, 1992; Fowles, 1996).

The topic of beauty and its relationship with women has always been a controversial one within feminist studies. The traditional beauty ideal, as the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's main assets, gives the message that all women should strive to achieve and maintain beauty. As second wave feminism—more concerned with women's bodies as passive objects for consumption by the male gaze (cf. Banner, 1983; Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Bovey, 1994; Chernin, 1981)—gave way to what has been called a *postfeminist era*, women's attitudes toward beauty have certainly remained ambivalent. In other words, second wave feminism viewed beauty standards as oppressive and coercive to women and their bodies (Wolf, 1991), whereas in the postfeminist era, beauty is best seen as a potentially gratifying tool of female agency and empowerment (Dellinger and Williams, 1997) and not at all oppressing. As Ringrow (2016: 2–3) succinctly states:

There exists a tension in the feminist scholarship between the potential harm caused by regarding cosmetics as necessary items to 'fix' the female appearance versus the (somewhat contested) potential pleasure gained by their usage.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is to assess the female identities which are constructed in a corpus of toiletries ads through the control of the media, or, what Cameron calls "*institutional coerciveness*", that is, "gender construction beyond the bounds of local communities of practice (1998:31)". In this respect, this paper aims to contribute to already existing research on gender identity construction and female depictions in a range of mediated contexts such as TV series, films or TV ads (cf. Behm, 2009; Chan, 2008; Stamou et al., 2012). However, the approach adopted in this paper differs greatly from that of previous content studies on TV ads in, at least, several aspects.

First, the analysis carried out in this paper is of a pragmatic and multimodal nature and is informed by the pragmatic notion of implicature in an attempt to make visible those assumptions which are conveyed, more or less forcefully, about the women in the ads and, to a lesser extent, to the products advertised. Second, the analysis of a corpus of TV ads should be multimodal because the role that non-linguistic modes may have in the transmission of both explicit and implicit assumptions in TV ads cannot be overlooked. In this vein, the role of images goes beyond that of mere adjuncts to a verbal message, as images constitute persuasive artefacts that are able to provide compelling arguments in the processing of the advertisement and, thus, to contribute to its rhetorical impact (Scott, 1994). Likewise, the influence of music on product choice is highly effective as a promotional device (Gorn, 1982). Third, as the recovery of implicatures is likely to be highly perceiver-dependent, the use of inter-examiner reliability as a methodological tool in this study is a way of gaining insights into the way audiences cognitively process ads and will be crucial to avoid the subjectivity that a qualitative analysis would bring to the interpretation of the findings. This aspect has been ignored in the literature on the study of implicatures and advertising (cf. Al Fajri, 2017; Díaz-Pérez, 2000; Melchenko, 2003; Pop, 2010 or Wambui, 2011, among others), at least to my knowledge. An exception is Desilla's work (2009, 2012, 2014), which focuses on the empirical analysis of implicature comprehension in films, and Griset's research (2017) on the testing of conceptual, procedural and purely pragmatic information within the relevance theory framework. Finally, by putting the onus on beauty products, I will be able to assess the predominant topical themes these ads rely on for their product promotion and to unveil existing gendered biased practices which might reveal a stereotypical or skewed view of women who consume toiletries and cosmetics as a group.

In what follows, Section 2 of this article outlines the main theoretical notions that inform my analysis. Section 3 describes the corpus and methodology of analysis. Section 4 contains the analysis and results of each of the thematic cores identified. Section 5 draws conclusions and further avenues for research.

2. Theoretical framework

Nowadays, it is a common trend in advertising to favour indirect means of making claims about products by having viewers infer information through a process of implicature recovery (cf. Geis, 1982). Even though some ads may still prefer a more straightforward and direct approach, the tendency has been to move away from direct claims since the 1960s (cf. Leigh, 1994; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2003).

Recent pragmatic approaches to the discourse of advertising by Martínez-Camino and Pérez-Sáiz (2010, 2012) and Simpson (2001)¹ have shown that advertisers resort to more or less direct forms of information transmission depending on whether the underlying rhetorical structure that predominates in the TV ad in question is that of a *reason* or *tickle* ad (cf. Bernstein, 1974). *Reason* ads provide an explicit reason or motive for the purchase of the product advertised (with the necessary presence of the logo, brand name and the product), are direct in nature, and fall within the *product* dimension identified by Crook (2004). For their part, *tickle* ads appeal to emotion or mood and fall within the *reward* dimension (Crook, 2004), as rewards are being offered at an emotional level especially through the use of non-verbal stimuli. Simpson (2001)

¹ I am greatly indebted to one anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to incorporate such a distinction in the article.

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