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# Age transcended: A semiotic and rhetorical analysis of the discourse of agelessness in North American anti-aging skin care advertisements<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing from a collection of over 160 North American print advertisements for anti-aging skin care products from January to December of 2009, this paper examines the discourse of agelessness, a vision of esthetic perfection and optimal health that is continually referred to by gerontologists, cultural theorists, and scientific researchers as a state of being to which humankind can aspire. Employing critical discourse analysis through the use of semiotics and visual rhetoric, this paper explores the means through which anti-aging skin care advertisements present to their viewers a particular object of desire, looking, more specifically, at how agelessness is presented as a way out and ultimate transcendence of age. Through the analytical tools of semiotics and visual rhetoric, four visions of agelessness are identified and explored in this paper: Agelessness as Scientific Purity, Agelessness as Genetic Impulse, Agelessness as Nature's Essence, and Agelessness as Myth. Whether found in the heights of scientific purity, the inner core of our genetic impulse, the depths of nature's essence, or whether agelessness itself has reached its own, untouchable, mythic status, the advertisements in this study represent one of the most pervasive vehicles through which our current vision(s) of ageless perfection are reflected, reinforced, and suspended in a drop of cream.

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## Introduction

In his introductory remarks at the fourth annual conference for the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, the President of A4M, Dr. Ronald Klatz, declares triumphantly to his audience: "We, the leaders of the anti-aging movements, will help to usher in a new modern age for humanity, The

Ageless Society. We will make REAL humanity's oldest dream: to bring an end to aging as we know it" (1996; 28). Using such verbs as degenerate, destroy, bankrupt, ravage, and crush to describe the danger of an unkempt population, Klatz proclaims vehemently that we are "on the brink of becoming a geriatric society full of wrinkled, frail, disease-ridden, liver-spotted economic parasites," and looks to the "higher truth" of science and technology as our only hope of salvation (28). In her ethnographic study of the anti-aging industry, Courtney Mykytyn (2008) argues that current anti-aging practitioners, such as those members of the A4M, have moved beyond the pathologization of the aging process, where the disease-model of aging is no longer the dominant perception. Instead of denying the naturalness of the aging process, anti-aging researchers and practitioners emphasize the agonizing yet ameliorable pain of this process and the

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humanness of our drive to overcome, to pursue through intervention liberation from the biological harnesses of bodily decline. Referred to by Mykytyn as a “hierarchy of nature,” this pursuit of liberation is conceptualized by anti-aging proponents as more innately human than the desire to age naturally (320). For Klatz and other proponents of anti-aging technology, in the march to human progress and esthetic perfection, age has become yet another hurdle to overcome. Although he does not deny the inevitability of our mortality, Klatz argues that age itself, through the pioneering work of the physicians and scientists of A4M, will one day be put on hold, bringing us, in our lifetime, to an era of agelessness.

While the topic of agelessness and anti-aging technology has been widely discussed, critiqued and explored over the past decade, very little has addressed the actual process of signification underlying this discourse. Drawing from a comprehensive sample of North American print advertisements for anti-aging skin care products from January to December of 2009, this paper examines how the notion of agelessness, and by its opposition, aging, is conceptualized and reified within the advertisements under study, specifically speaking to the rhetorical ordering of ‘human nature’ referred to above. Employing discourse analysis through the use of semiotics and visual rhetoric, this study explores the means through which anti-aging skin care advertisements present to their viewers this particular object of desire, looking, more specifically, at how agelessness is presented as the liberation from and ultimate transcendence of age. Analyzing each advertisement individually and the collection of advertisements more generally, my research aims to uncover larger patterns within representations of agelessness and aging, and their place in the wider North American Anglo-culture in which they operate.

### Anti-aging technology and the ageless self

Although the claims made by Klatz and his followers may be deemed extreme in most circles, the notion that age can and should be transcended underlies an industry that has profits in the billions in the United States alone. Paired with the spending power and consumer habits of a characteristically youth-oriented generation, the search for a means of taking control of and ultimately conquering age has been met with a surge in available products and procedures to meet this demand. With the introduction of Retin A- and AHA-based products into the cosmetics market in the early 1990s, over the counter anti-aging skin care products, or ‘cosmeceuticals’, have taken off from \$3.1 billion in profits in the United States in 1997 to almost \$5.1 billion in 2001 and had been projected to reach over \$8 billion in profits by 2010 (Bayer, 2005; De Guzman, 2007). Today, bio-identical and human growth hormones have entered the anti-aging scene, promising not only a more youthful appearance, but also a longer, healthier life (Weintraub, 2010).

What is inherent in the promotion of anti-aging products and procedures, and explicit in many of the advertisements and medical texts that have been analyzed, is the broader discourse of agelessness, a vision of esthetic perfection and optimal health that is continually referred to by gerontologists, cultural theorists, and scientific researchers as a state of being to which humankind can aspire. While critiques of the obsession with youth and overall disdain for old age have

been raised before (see e.g. De Beauvoir, 1970; Freidan, 1993), the same arguments have been picked up with increasing urgency as advancing developments in anti-aging technology further reinforce the notion that the ‘possibility’ of agelessness can in fact become a reality. Explored by gerontologists (see e.g. Cole, 1992; Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003; Katz, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001/2002; Katz & Marshall, 2003; Lupton, 2000), and cultural critics (see e.g. Andrews, 1999; Angus & Reeve, 2006; Bayer, 2005; Brooks, 2010; Gibson, 2000; Gullette, 2004; Hendricks, 2005; Jakobovits, 2003; Twigg, 2007), this new vision of anti-aging or agelessness has been critiqued in terms of an increasingly ‘anti-aging’ culture of consumption and the effect that these recent advances in body modification have had on our perception of what it means to grow old. From the field of critical discourse analysis, scholars such as Calasanti (2005, 2007; Calasanti & King, 2005; Calasanti, Slevin, & King, 2006); Johnson (2008); Vincent (2006, 2007; Vincent et al., 2008); and Coupland (2003, 2009) have focused on the discourse behind the pathologization of age and aging. Vincent’s work in particular, analyzes how the language and rhetoric of scientific texts which surround anti-aging medicine have shaped our cultural understanding of the aging process. Continuing from where these scholars left off, the focus of this particular study moves beyond the stigmatization and pathologization of age to an inquiry into the discursive construction of what it means to achieve this state of being outside the bounds of age. How, in other words, is this particular “hierarchy of nature,” to borrow from Mykytyn, mobilized in anti-aging advertisements? What are the rhetorical devices deployed in these advertisements to move consumers to this particular path of liberation? The aim of this study is to identify and explore the representational means through which this notion of ‘agelessness’ is packaged and commodified, to understand how, in short, if we are able to overcome age, this conceptual state of being is ‘made meaningful’ within the larger discourse of consumer culture.

Although this study very much relies on the structuralist roots of semiotic and rhetorical analysis, the aim of this work is not to reveal any essentialist notion of the ‘deep structure’ of the advertisement, but rather to employ these analytical devices as a means of illuminating larger patterns of representation. Advertisements, as Roland Barthes (1977) once remarked, are unique from other forms of representation; they are designed with a specific purpose in mind: to sell goods. For Johnson (2008), advertisements have become the “engine of consumer culture;” it is through advertising that the values and belief structures of the surrounding cultural landscape are reflected, reinforced, and magnified into widely consumed signifiers, repeatedly resurfacing in the discursive practices of everyday life (1–4). Within an anti-aging culture of ageless beauty and body maintenance, anti-aging skin care advertisements have played a major discursive role in both the articulation and reception of what has become a discourse of agelessness. In the promotion of anti-aging skin care products, this study addresses the semiotic and rhetorical means through which agelessness is placed in relation to age as a means of selling these particular products. By moving beyond the single text in isolation, this study does not attempt to speak to any ‘true’ meaning of aging or agelessness, or any ‘true’ reading of their representations. The aim of this study is rather to identify the dominant ways in which these concepts are represented in consumer culture.

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