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ANTONELLA NAPOLITANO

LOVE
is in the
(H)AIR

*A discourse analysis
of hair product advertising*



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*To my mother
who has survived too many bad hair days
with impeccable hairstyles*

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INTRODUCTION

Advertising is everywhere. In our society, we are constantly exposed to promotional messages: we are surrounded by advertisements both when walking in the streets and when using old and new media, printed press, radio, telephone, television, e-mail, social networks, websites and search engines (see Rahm 2006: 193).

As is evident from the language and images which represent or address women, in contemporary Western media femininity is strongly connected to attractiveness. “Women’s bodies have become the arena where cultural meaning are projected and played out” (Travis and Meginnis-Payne 2002: 198). Although women have acquired more power in society and gender inequalities are gradually being reduced, it is undeniable that patriarchal ideology still has relevant consequences on women’s lives, as media and society continue to connect women to their role of housewife, to the imaginary world of romance and to evaluate them based on their beauty. Consumerism and mass marketing have intensified the representation of the women’s body as a ‘project’ (Brumberg 1989) in need of continuous reshaping and repair. Women are bombarded with communications suggesting ways to improve their appearance. As a consequence, girls and women tend to internalise an external observer’s perspective, thus perceiving themselves as the objects of a meticulous work of self-improvement required to produce the unattainable proper image. Such pressures tend to lead to an increase of body shame and anxiety, sometimes even resulting in eating disorders and depression.

Advertising represents one of the most powerful forms of communication conveying beauty messages and conceptualising attractiveness in a cultural context. Cosmetics, in particular, are often marketed by creating the idea that the products will make the consumer look younger, slimmer, prettier (Ringrow 2016: 1-2), as required by circulated standards. Companies are thus constantly launching novel products with extraordinary powers, presenting old versions as obsolete, and continuously creating needs, leveraging on the idea of ‘newness’, which is typical of our consumeristic society (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 176).

Women’s magazines abound with advertisements and editorials which promote the ideology of consumerism. Glossy publications such as Vogue

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and *Cosmopolitan* contain a large amount of ads aimed at women featuring beautiful models and celebrities and promoting personal care and fashion products. Such texts seem to identify woman with a consumption category, conveying the idea that ‘to be a woman’ means to know what to buy in order to obtain beauty, fitness, attractive men, entertainment, success and happiness (Croteau and Hoynes 2014: 180-182).

Advertising discourse certainly represents an area of inquiry which has been extensively investigated from multiple perspectives of analysis in the last decades. Nevertheless, the author hopes the present book may constitute both a useful reference source for collecting some of the most relevant research frameworks for the study of advertisements and for providing interesting insights on the link between gender and ads. In particular, investigating the discourse of advertisements which promote haircare cosmetic products may help bring to light some of the stereotypes and deception conveyed by modern advertising practices, both at a global and at a national level. Moreover, by demystifying the rhetorical strategies regularly exploited in ads, the volume also wishes to raise awareness, especially among young generations of women, of the need for a more critical and detached approach to promotional messages and for a resistance to beauty standards.

The first chapter analyses the discourse of advertising and its generic structure, also considering different communicative strategies. The section then focuses on the features of ads at the different linguistic levels (e.g. graphological, phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic), directing toward similarities of advertisements with orality and poetry. The chapter ends with a short presentation of the evolution of advertising over time, considering the relationship between the people and the product on display and linking advertising styles to specific moments of marketing and advertising history.

The second chapter reflects on the significance of hair in culture over time, from ancient to modern, tracing the history of hair product advertising from the 17th century onwards.

The third chapter connects advertising to the female image and world, focusing in particular on ads published in print women’s lifestyle magazines. This section traces the history and characteristics of magazines and analyses the features of beauty ads. Particular attention is devoted to the problem-solution pattern: to favour consumerism, the female body is constructed in such a way as to be perpetually in need of remedies for its imperfections, thus presenting an unreachable model and favouring insecurities. Another typical strategy presented is the usage of scientific or pseudo-scientific language,

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figures and data in order to support the claims made in the ads. The section, then, investigates the exploitation of the female image, sexuality and gender stereotypes in advertising where all types of goods are sold.

The fourth chapter presents the methodological framework for the case study in this volume, analysing the linguistic and visual strategies adopted in printed hair product advertisements published in women's magazines in the UK and in Italy. The study integrates corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Baker 2006) with content analysis, also reflecting on the visual aspects of the texts (i.e. images, colours and typography) (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). To this end, Lazar's (2006) feminist reading of advertisements offered a convenient reference for the analysis of the stereotypical representations of women recurring in the corpus. Hofstede's (2001) theory of cultural dimensions also represents a useful model to support the comparison of the choices made in advertising in the two countries under study.

The fifth chapter reports the comparative study carried out on hair product ads in both quantitative and qualitative analytical terms, taking into account discursive features, functions and visual elements. The analysis leads to the distinction of advertisements in two rough categories, labelled respectively as 'product performance' and 'sexual innuendo' ads. The former class highlights the technical performance of the product advertised, while the latter exploits sensual and emotional references. The study reveals that ads belonging to the first group could be found in both countries, with the different national versions of the ads for the same brand remaining almost unvaried regardless of the context in which they were published. Sexual innuendo ads appear instead to be more peculiar to the United Kingdom, therefore revealing a cultural and linguistic specificity. Moreover, the investigation focused on the representation of women and the connection of hair with power and sexuality, also reflecting on the role played by culture and ideology in the construction of the adverts.

