

# **Gender and the Discourse of Advertising in English and Persian Magazine Advertisements**

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## **Abstract**

The cultural content of advertising, its language and its connection with gender issues are deeply rooted in our society. Language and gender are significant issues that remain widely controversial in the domain of advertising. The main purpose of this study is to analyze the language of advertising in Persian and English in order to estimate the specificities of the advertising genre in the two different cultural and linguistic systems. The approach employed in the study draws on the ideas of the functionalist interpretation of text typology and source text analysis as proposed by Nord (1997) and Reiss (2000). Besides, it seeks to understand the role of advertising and how it affects the culturally gendered stereotypes, and how each society portrays the image of women compared to that of men. To achieve these objectives, forty advertisements of six magazines were analyzed. The analysis revealed that Persian magazine advertisements share some similar structural discourse strategies with English advertisements. Moreover, differences in culturally gendered stereotypes between these contexts were identified.

**Key words:** language and gender, discourse of advertising

## **Introduction**

Advertising is a common phenomenon nowadays and people are exposed to the advertising process wherever they are and it has gained the attention and interest of a large number of individuals in different societies around the globe.

Advertising is referred to as a form of discourse in the sense that it has influenced not only the structure of language and the modality of lifestyle, but also the content of routine daily acts of communicative exchanges. The messages of advertising have permeated the entire cultural landscape. Printed advertisements fill the pages of newspapers and magazines. Commercials interrupt TV and radio programs constantly.

With the advent of industrialization in the 19th century, style of presentation became increasingly important in raising the persuasive efficacy of the ad text. Accordingly, advertising started to change the structure and use of language and verbal communication. From the 1920s

onwards, advertising agencies sprang up all over, broadening the attempts of their predecessors to build a rhetorical bridge between the product and the consumer's consciousness. In magazine advertisements as one of the forms of advertisement, communication requires the presence and interaction of a number of elements for the understanding and the successfulness of the message. The interaction takes place between the 'addresser' who is the advertiser, the 'addressee' who is the public or the reader, the 'meaning' which is given to the product and transmitted between the participants, the 'medium' which is language and image, the 'channel' which is in this case the written form, and finally the 'context' which refers to the social and cultural situation, as well as the shared knowledge between the advertiser and the consumer (Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985 p.15).

It is assumed that advertisements rely on different relationships, and the three most important factors that must be involved and should be taken into consideration in the advertising context are: the 'individual' who is seeing the advertisement, the 'context' of the advertisement and the 'content' of its message because these are very crucial in creating people's own worldviews (Sheehan, 2004). According to Kelly-Holmes (2005), these relationships are "socially, economically, culturally, linguistically and politically constructed", and for the advertisement to work successfully, the advertiser needs to assume "a common culture or communicative context" within the audience.

## **2. *Formats of advertisements***

According to Leiss (1997), the relationship between the product and the consumer are divided into four basic communicative formats. The first format is the 'product-information format', which describes and emphasizes the product and its utility, by means of a text which explains the benefits and the characteristics of the commodity (p.240). The second format has to do with the relationship between the product and picture: it is the so called 'product-image format', in which the name of the brand and package are important as well as the illustration usually used to valorize the product. Here, the use of art and photography encourage the placement of the product in a "symbolic rather than utilitarian setting", because the message implied in the visual representation gives the opportunity to explain the "potentialities of products and their meaning in the human world" (p.244). The 'personalized format' is another association between the commodity and people, in which persons are "explicitly and directly interpreted in their relationship to the world of the product" (p. 246). In this case, the product is presented in relation to the mother-daughter or male-female relationships. The 'lifestyle format' is the last relation which is established between the consumer, the product, the setting and the consumption style by combining aspects of the 'product-image and personalized format' (P: 259). Here, images, event and experiences are taken from everyday life and from the dreaming world to present the advertisement in an attractive and exciting way.

## **3. *The cultural dimension of advertising***

People's needs have never been natural, but always cultural, always social, always defined relatives to the standard of their societies (Schudson, 1984 & Sheehan, 2004).

Consumers derive meaning not only from the product alone, but also from the external world, from experiences, from societal and cultural elements, and from their beliefs and values, because the suggestive meaning or vitality of the product is taken from the events and

adventures of everyday life. Sheehan (2004) asserts that the cultural lens allows us to create meaning from the product and services that come into our view.

For successful communication to take place, the audiences must be taken into consideration in the advertising process because “what is appropriate for one audience may be unsuitable for another” (Sheehan, 2004, p. 85). Audiences belonging to different backgrounds, belonging to different societies and to different cultures, customs and religions interpret the advertising messages differently and use culture differently.

Moreover, it is obvious that language may change when the audiences differ in the social or educational status (Leech, 1972). In other words, when addressing different audiences, social factors such as, age, education, gender as well as other external components, should be taken into consideration. For example, in the Iranian context, TV and Magazines’ advertisements are addressed to different audiences and are using a different language and discourse. The reason is that the audience of magazines is expected to be more educated and seems to belong to a different social class than TV’s audiences. It is true that advertising should adapt to the social and cultural norms of a specific audience. However, it is assumed that in any given society we find two different audiences or identities. There are those who follow “the dictates of media culture” by “following the dominant fashion, values and behaviour”, and there is another group who resists “dominant forms of culture and identity, creating their own style and identities” (Kellner, 1995). The second group in my opinion is more resistant and cannot be easily influenced by the advertising manipulations. Stuart Ewen and Jhally (1995) suggests that there are two worlds corresponding to the previous two audiences; there is a world of “substance where real power rests and where people live their real lives”, and there is “a world of style and surface” where audiences easily submit to consumerism because of their social and cultural education. Finally, the language and discourse of advertising remain crucial to understanding the objective of advertising as well as the social and cultural dimensions used to achieve and influence audiences. However, the role of the language of gender is very important to clarify the language used in advertising and the impact it has on women and men.

#### **4. The role of language and visual images**

The word and the picture do not exist in pure contradistinctions; rather, there is a continuum whereby the word is a learned and arbitrary or conventional symbol and the image is a partially learned and partially naturalistic one (Gombrich, 1986 & Fowles, 1996).

The function of language in advertising is to express feelings, offer advice, inform and persuade, describe or create. Advertising language can either follow “a prescribed path of advertising clichés” or have the freedom to “deviate from it and from the rules of the language itself” (Leech, 1972, p. 4). Moreover, the fact of advertising different kinds of products “means making different choices of language and in particular different choices of vocabulary” (Leech, 1972, p. 57).

According to Fowles (1996), it is important to distinguish between images and words. Illustrations are “one kind of symbol and words are distinctly another”; words are completely “arbitrary creations”, while images are “naturalistic representations”. Therefore, the heart of any advertisement is not only either the picture or the text, but it is “the visual imagery redolent with symbolic properties that the advertiser hopes the consumer will find significant” since the combination of text and image has become very important for successful

communication. Similarly, according to Leiss (1997), the prevalence of using images in the media is gradually growing, which improves 'the ambiguity of meaning' embedded in the advertising message. Visual representations become "more common and the relationship between text and visual image become more complementary".

According to Barthes (1964) and Vestergaard & Schroder (1985), images are 'ambiguous or polysemic', while verbal messages are 'unambiguous or monosemic'. He mentions two main functions of text in relation to picture: *anchorage* in which "the text provides the link between the picture and the situation in space and time", and *relay* which denotes "a reciprocal relation between text and picture". It is true that sometimes pictures are vaguer than language, and need to be explained by it; however, both language and imagery are crucial in the communication process, and both of them are complementary in constituting the meaning expected from the advertisement.

### **5. Language and gender**

Language, gender and society are three complex and closely interwoven terms. The question of whether language reflects or shapes the social life and consequently gender relationships and expectations is a central one. The answer to these questions will help us understand how men and women's space, speech, perspectives and choices are both determined and reflected by language. There are so many questions that need consideration. For example how do the socio-cultural actors interact with language in order to determine men and women's relationships in society? Why and how is gender deemed to be an important and powerful component in social interaction? How does its influence go beyond people's thoughts, attitudes and beliefs? How can society explain the learning and maintenance of gender? How is gender negotiated in language and across cultures? How does the social construction of society shape women and men's personalities in terms of social roles, expectations, language choice, and traditional beliefs and so on?

The aim of this study will basically be to explore the importance of both language and society in determining and reinforcing female and male differences in speech (form and content), beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. The emphasis will be on how gender is negotiated and represented in language and society, and how the linguistic form may reflect and shape the social and cultural conditions under which women and men live. Instead of gender being viewed as an essential characteristic of an individual's psyche, it is understood as a thoroughly social construct, one that is produced by language and discourse (Weatherall, 2002).

The investigation and identification of differences between men's and women's speech date back across time. Until 1944, no specific piece of writing on gender differences in language was published. As stated by Grey (1998), it was in the 1970s that comparison between female cooperativeness and male competitiveness in linguistic behavior began to be noticed. Mulac, et al., (2001) concentrated on the term 'gender as culture' and ran an empirical study on linguistic differences between men and women.

Researchers in language and gender such as Lakoff (1975), Coates (1998), Fishman (1997), Tannen (1986) and Cameron (1992, 1996) all draw attention to the differences in male and female speech. These differences have been perceived within various theories. For instance, Lakoff (1975), the pioneer of studies on language and gender, introduced the *deficit* model. She explained women's language in terms of inadequacies resulting from the political and cultural subordination of women by men. In her view the linguistic features of women's language

portray them as tentative, uncertain, and lacking in authority and submissive (Lakoff 1975). Other explanations given by authors such as Coates (1988, 1993), Cameron (1992) and Tannen (1986) have termed women's language as simply different, i.e. nurturing, supportive and co-operative, in accordance with their socialisation. These differences have resulted in theories such as the *difference approach*, the *dominance approach* and the stronger version of dominance, i.e. the *deficit model*.

Lakoff (1975) propounded the *deficit* theory by expressing the view that women's language is deficient and inadequate. The *dominance* approach takes a similar stance, except that it is a weaker version of the *deficit* model. It focuses on dominance over women by men (Fishman 1997; Zimmerman and West 1983). The *difference* approach explains women's language as being simply different to that of men, in that they are more nurturing, supportive and co-operative (Tannen 1990; Coates 1993). Though this approach discusses the nature of women's language on the whole, it overlooks the political impetus of the focus on women's language. Male domination is by no means a thing of the past. However, the *deficit*, and to an extent the *dominance*, model does not consider the complexities involved in women's language. As a result of the inadequacies of both theories, modern sociolinguists led by Cameron (1992) have argued that both approaches are necessary for the interpretation of language and gender. In fact, both

theories may be relevant in explaining men and women's language in any context. As such, both theories will be employed in the explanation of men and women's use of vague language in this study. Although the researcher is aware of the current debates questioning some of the fundamental theoretical assumptions on which the *dominance* and *difference* theories are based (Cameron 2005), this is not the focus of this study and would not receive extensive discussion. However, the performative notions of gender as "an enactment, discursive construction or product of social interaction" (Stokoe 2005, p. 119) is applied in the discussion of the data.

Many feminists have demonstrated through research that language, understood as discourse, functions as a powerful tool of patriarchal culture. Thorne and Henley (1975) succinctly state that language helps to enact and transmit every type of inequality, including that between the sexes, since it forms part of the *micropolitical* structure that helps to maintain the larger politico-economic structure. According to them our use of language shapes our understanding of the social world, our relationships to one another, and our social identities. De Klerk (1997) noted that gender identities reflect the material interests of those who have power and those who do not. She states that this relationship between men and women can be perceived as politically-contracted gender linked roles in which language is constructed. Coates (1993) reinforces this notion by explaining that when children learn to speak, one of the things they learn is the cultural role assigned to them on the basis of their sex. When men and women interact, they interpret the responses of the other in the light of their own gender-specific expectations. This, according to Tannen (1990), results in misinterpretation and even conflict. In order to achieve a better understanding of men and women's language, numerous studies have been conducted into the linguistic behaviour of men and women.

Shimanoff (1977) analysed politeness between men and women by measuring it in terms of linguistic features and communicative functions. She found that males and females were equally, but differentially, polite. The males in her study used equal proportions of negative

(reducing imposition) and positive (supporting the other) politeness, whereas females preferred positive features. Shimanoff (1977) suggests that the female preference could be due to the fact that females by their nature do not like to impose. Hirschman (1974) as reported by Preisler (1986) used simple frequency counts to analyze male assertiveness and female supportiveness in the use of fillers, what he calls qualifiers (e.g. 'maybe', 'sort of,' etc.), and affirmative responses.

Important as the dichotomies of male and female speech may be, gender cannot be the sole determinant of these differences. Torres (1993) points out that, questions about language and gender have become more complex since researchers have realized that the question of gender differences in language use relates to other issues such as age, qualifications, race, class, and social roles. In this regard Preisler (1986) states: A speaker's choice of speech forms... is determined in a predictable but often complex way, by the structure and properties of the social situation as defined by an interplay of demographic variables such as region, social class, ethnic

membership, age, sex and occupation with variables directly related to the speech event such as setting, medium, relative status of participants, degree of formality and topic.

The main purpose of this study is to analyze the language of advertising in Persian and English in order to estimate the specificities of the advertising genre in the two different cultural and linguistic systems. The approach employed in the study draws on the ideas of the functionalist interpretation of text typology and source text analysis as proposed by Nord (1997) and Reiss (2000). Besides, it seeks to understand the role of advertising and how it affects the culturally gendered stereotypes, and how each society portrays the image of women compared to that of men. To achieve these objectives, eighty textual and visual parts of six magazines were analyzed.

## **Methods**

### **Corpus**

Advertisements are collected from eight three women magazines which are: *Woman's Weekly*, *Woman*, and *Woman's day*. And three Iranian women magazines: *Zane Rooz*, *Khanevadeh*, and *Roozhaye Zendegi*. The most predominant advertisements collected from the British and Iranian magazines present women's traditional roles as wives and mothers, as well as their role in relation to beauty and fashion to maintain their physical appearance. The selected magazines of Iran are from 2014 and magazines from British from 2008.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Analysis of English and Persian advertising texts**

#### **Rhetorical Devices**

The corpus showed that 85% of English and 70% of Persian advertising texts involved one or another form of rhetorical devices. The corpus analysis reveals that the most common figures of repetition used in English and Persian advertising texts are repetition of sounds, syllables and keywords, enumeration, and synonymy. In sum, both English and Persian advertisements employ large numbers of repetitive devices which help to impress the audience through the constant emphasis of key words and ideas. The second group of schemes is the figures of

omission. It can be said that figures of omission stand in contrast with figures of repetition as they avoid verbosity and aim at an intentional omission of words and phrases. This attracts the addressee's attention to the missing elements; arouses interest and emotions. Especially widely used rhetorical figure belonging to this group in both EAL and PAL is ellipsis which refers to the omission of a word or words readily implied by the context (Goddard 2003, p. 125). Advertising language is often described as imitating spoken discourse. Goddard (2003, p. 125) notes that spoken language is highly elliptical: ellipsis is used for language economy; also, it can create the sense of informality:

### ***Lexico-Grammatical Devices***

This section concentrates on how advertisements manipulate various parts of speech in order to make the message more persuasive. The attention is paid to some of the aspects of adjectival, adverbial, verbal and noun usage. A majority of persuasion techniques strives to create a positive impression through evaluation and emotional appeal. Emotionality and evaluation are best expressed through an extensive use of adjectives or adverbs which attribute certain qualities and properties to the object advertised (Gramley and Pätzold 2002, p. 103).

Another noticeable linguistic device expressing persuasion is manipulation of verbs through tense shifting. Tense is the category of verb related to time (Gramley and Pätzold 2002, p. 112). The continuum of time can be generally divided up into three levels: past, present and future. The corpus of English advertising texts exhibits the dominant usage of the present tense (90%). Sometimes one advertising text can combine several time perspectives, especially with the aim of contrasting past, present or future situations. In English, the present tense is the so-called "unmarked" tense used for characterization of habitual actions, narration of historical present, reporting mental or emotional state, commenting on immediately accompanying actions and demonstration or explanation of the individual acts involved (Gramley and Pätzold 2002, p. 113). The present tense verbs help English advertisements to characterize and portray the desirable situation, express positive thoughts and comments, and show the benefits of the advertised object. Also, the present tense infers that the action is happening now and that everything being said is a "general truth".

### **Conclusion**

This study has shown that language, gender and advertising are very complex and intermingled issues. We have seen how these elements affect and influence each other in connection with other social and cultural factors. The way women are addressed and spoken about in relation to men, and the way women and men use language in everyday life have proved very important to understanding the way women are depicted in British and Iranian advertisements. Religion is generally believed to be one of the foremost forces that preserve traditions, by maintaining men and women's interactions under control, and contributing as a powerful source to the subordination of women and this factor seems to play much important role in Iranian advertisement section. In other words, religious beliefs are reflected in everyday life, through the clothing of both men and women, how life events such as birth, marriage or death are ritualized, and what is the suitable role expected from males and females in terms of home, work, childcare, politics and law.

There are always cultural and religious beliefs and some patriarchal interpretations of Islam that are still used to justify the situation of Iranian women and abuses committed against them. As has been pointed out, cultural values are the core of advertising messages; therefore, advertisers display women in ways that are socially and culturally adequate with the local norms. Besides, we have seen that women are increasingly portrayed as objects of sexual desire, being shown as attractive, thin and young. These unrealistic images of women reinforce prevailing stereotypes and support unrealistic body ideals. And advertisers want people to understand that women's sense of life is believed to be derived from body attractiveness, something which is unrealistic and unattainable by the majority of women, and which is true in both cultures.

After analyzing the advertisements of both societies, I would like to conclude that as much as there are similarities, there are also differences in the British and Iranian advertising systems. Women's roles as wives and mothers are more explicit in the Iranian advertisements but not very much emphasized in the magazines when compared to the different functions the majority of Iranian women perform in everyday life.

Moreover, while British advertisements present less dressed or naked models, since women in this culture have freedom concerning their bodies, Iranian advertisements do not show women either nude because of governmental regulations.

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