# A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Language Used in Dove's Advertisements

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**Abstract:** *The study investigates the use of language in the 'Real Beauty' advertising campaign initiated by the care brand Dove from 2006 to 2020 through the lens of Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional critical discourse analysis and Wodak's (2001) historical-discourse analysis. By unfolding the textual elements used in five video advertisements, it aims to examine how the advertiser Dove constructs the beauty image of women through discursive strategies used in the text and investigate the possible ideologies underlying the discourse. The findings indicate that the textual resources used in Dove's advertisements experienced a discursive construction to reveal the essence of feminism and further explore the connection between female's negative self-evaluation and social judgment. It concludes that although the changing traits of Dove's advertisements may not escape from the accusation of legitimating the commercialism, they indeed attempted to empower women with the autonomy to control the vision of beauty and provide solutions to unite women of all ages and with all colors.*

**Keywords:** *critical discourse analysis, feminism, advertisements*

## 1. Introduction

The construction of female gender in advertisements has been a common ground to explore. Our world is filled with numerous discourses of advertisements realized in the form of multiple semiotic resources and released on different platforms such as TV, social media, and magazines, which have manipulated individual and social recognition of identity. Many advertisements have portrayed ideal images of the female and propagate their underlying ideologies through a subtle design (Tabol, 2000).[7] The depiction of bodily representation has been engaged with power relationships and surveillance within normative discourses, which potentially influences how females are inspired to construct their identities through the consumption of certain products (Millard, 2009). [5]It is important for researchers to notice the power of language in these discourses and delve into the intriguing structures to explore the underlying beliefs that advertisers are trying to assert.

After exploring most advertisements that have portrayed the female, some scholars proposed the idea of femvertising (Åkestam, Rosengren & Dahlen, 2017)[1] referring to the advertisements that challenge traditional stereotypes in female advertising. With the progress of many social campaigns such as feminism movements, the traditional advertisements that describe women as a less dominant and powerless group have been replaced by new discourses in which woman are ideally portraited to embrace 'power,' 'freedom' and 'change' (Xu & Tan, 2020).[11] On the one hand, some studies acknowledged the importance of the transformation of women's image in these advertisements (e.g., Åkestam et al., 2017).[1] On the other hand, some scholars criticized that these feminism-oriented advertisements pretended to empower females but actually undermined feminism by the nature of consumerism (e.g., Machin & Thornborrow, 2003).[4]

Regarding such an interesting debate, the present study follows a critical discourse analysis approach to explore some femvertisements of Dove. Dove is a globalized care brand owned by Unilever originating in America. In 2004, it initiated a 'Real Beauty' campaign that aims to alter the conventional definition of female beauty. Along with it, Dove also started a Self-Esteem Project that claims to raise people's awareness of girls' body confidence and promote a real and practical understanding of females. Since then, most of Dove's subsequent advertisements were designed based on its advocation (Millard, 2009).[5] It is significant to take this brand as an example to explore how femvertising has constructed female images through the investigation of a small number of advertisements.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Review of CDA

The approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been a common theoretical framework adopted by most studies examining this issue of female representation in ads. CDA considers discourse as a form of social practice. It implies a dialectical relationship between the particular discursive choices made in a discourse and social institutions, structures, and situations that have framed it (Fairclough, Mulderrig & Wodak, 2011).[3] Within the board field of CDA, the observations of semiotic choices can be applied to linguistic elements with different affordances. To analyze the linguistic choices, CDA suggests that various word choices can build up different 'lexical fields' to convey particular values (Machin & Mayr, 2012). CDA aims to analyze how power relations are intertwined with language, reveal the ideology underlying in the social-cultural context, and finally reflect on the 'taken-for-granted' discourses in our life (Fairclough et al., 2011).[3] Therefore, it has been widely used as a proper approach to analyze the semiotic choices in the advertisements and uncover the underlying power relationships.

However, CDA has also been criticized for several limitations. According to Machin and Mayr (2012), firstly, it analyzes only a small number of texts based on the interest and passion of researchers. The characteristics found in a selected discourse may fail to be generalized to other discourses. Secondly, CDA pays more attention to the interpretation rather than the text production. It leads to the inability to understand different social contexts in which text producers are situated. And most often, it fails to follow the historical changes of modes. Thirdly, CDA is ideologically predetermined by the research interest. The interpretation might be too subjective to be a useful method to boost social change. Overall, it is important to confess that these challenges also apply to the present study. The study attempts to refer to some analytical tools in the discourse-historical approach to provide some supplementary information to make up the criticism on the lack of historical and social context.

### 2.2 Previous Studies on Feminism in Advertisements

Some studies have highlighted the femvertising and its ongoing, influential, and significant effect. Millard (2009) [5]conducted a social semiotic analysis with interviews to analyze Dove's presentation of female beauty and its influence on the cognition of some Canadian women. The study claimed that Dove paved the way for women to join the fight against the traditional impossible standard of beauty. Similarly, Zhao (2017)[12] took a critical discourse approach to examine some Chinese domestic advertisements released since the 1980s. The author interpreted them as a progressive social presentation of female identities that transformed females from housewife to well-educated and independent figures, which helped females to evaluate their domestic and social roles. Both studies used CDA to confirm the significance of femvertising, which is in line with the findings suggested by the scholars who defined this phenomenon (Åkestam et al., 2017).[1]

However, some scholars have held a pessimistic attitude on femvertising. Tabol (2000) [7]conducted an intertextual analysis of British telecom advertisements. She acknowledged the effect of feminist-influenced psychology. But she claimed that the language strategies used to portrait males and females were imbalanced and females were not commonly depicted with positiveness, which reasserted the stereotype and undermined feminism. Her findings were consistent with Machin and Thornborrow (2003).[4] They conducted a multimodal discourse analysis on 44 different versions of advertising images in *Cosmopolitan*. Although females were depicted as independent white-collar workers, the figures relied on seduction rather than intellect to empower themselves. They warned that the social maneuvering on false feminism construction was subject to consumerism. Their findings echoed the conclusion of Windels, Champlin, Shelton, Sterbenk, and Poteet (2020), [9]who combined a discourse analysis with quantitative analysis to summarize a large dataset of 163 advertisements from five beauty brands. These studies all confirmed the fact that advertisements indeed incorporated and duplicated feminism ideas in the language, but they served the goal of consumerisms, as all advertisements always will.

The same conclusion has also been found across different social and cultural contexts. Qiao and Wang (2019)[6] used a social semiotic approach to analyze the ideologies underlying the linguistic and visual choices made by SK-II. The brand started a campaign of 'Change Destiny' in Chinese marketing to challenge the biased concepts on elderly females. Although the brand tried to use language strategies to appeal to women, the visual elements still complied with the conventional stereotype and dwarfed the practical effect to promote females' rights. Their findings were affirmed by Xu and Tan (2020),[11] who analyzed the same advertisements published in China through a specific period. However, their comparison focused more on the construction of each advertisement and their common features.

The present research manages to fill this gap by looking into the individual differences of a specific brand

promoting femvertising across time. The study employs a critical discourse analysis approach to analyze the language used in the advertisements of Dove from 2006 to 2020. It will address the following research questions: (1) How does Dove construct the female identity through discursive language strategies? (2) What are the changes and meaning potentials underlying different advertisements?

## 3. Methodology

The data used in this study were five advertisements released from 2006 to 2020. The original videos were released on Dove's official homepage and Youtube both. The language used in these advertisements was transcribed into plain text. The resources were selected based on the principles to select discourses proposed by Wodak (2001). [10]First, the cluster of advertisements was a context-dependent semiotic practice within the mass media field. Second, they were shaped by Dove's 'Real Beauty' campaign, and they also constituted the campaign itself. Third, most of them were related to a macro-topic concerning contemporary female's identity in advertisements. Fourth, around these advertisements there was argumentation from different perspectives (e.g., Millard, 2009; Windels et al., 2020),[5][9] since these ads had already been examined by these scholars. It is meaningful to take a new perspective to delve in these advertisements and deeply understand the complicate construction within them.

The methodological tool for analysis is Fairclough's three-layered model (Fairclough, 1989) [2]for CDA. The first stage is concerned with formal properties in the text, as a matter of identifying and categorizing certain features. The second stage is about interpretation, which emphasizes the relationship between text and interaction. It sees the text as the product of a process of production and also a resource to interpret. The analyst is in the position to offer evidence to demonstrate the underlying relationships of linguistic choices. The third stage takes account of the relationship between interaction and socio-cultural context. In the following part, the study attempts to investigate how the language used by Dove has demonstrated certain features in each stage of analysis and how it has created particular social connections.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Words & Text

The first dimension is mainly about the description of the text. Fairclough (1989) [2]indicates that the analyst should recognize the formal properties in the text and categorize them based on different features. In this study, the description of various linguistic features is inspired by the semiotic analysis of Machin and Mayr (2012) and the discourse-historical approach of Wodak (2001). [10]The following table presents a comparative analysis of language with predominant features and other characteristics conveyed in the five advertisements.

In terms of the content, these stories have three things in common. Firstly, the products were not actually featured in four of the advertisements. Although Dove still put commercial ads in other publications to promote its products, its intention of persuading female customers to purchase certain Dove products in these advertisements was somehow faded since the specific products themselves were not even mentioned. Among these five advertisements, only the one released in 2012 mentioned the products and their impact. The text description is shown in Table 1.

Secondly, following Dove's 'Real Beauty' campaign, the ads mentioned usually described a scene in which females were disadvantaged. Their language tried to encourage women to criticize and challenge the traditional impossible standard of beauty that was taken for granted. Thirdly, most of them share a core story encouraging females to get rid of the influence of low-esteem and negative self-evaluation. However, through distinctive constructions of the linguistic features employed, these advertisements showed different focus and degrees of attitudes in the interpretation. For example, compared to *Little Girl* released in 2006, *Show Us* in 2020 focused more on criticizing the old vision of beauty which overemphasized the idea of body shame and thus promoting a new vision of beauty by directly, which implicated a mightier power encouraging all the women to defeat gender stereotype in the face.

*Table 1: Description of the texts.*

| Items | 2006 *Little Girl* | 2012 *Dove Girls* | 2015 *Dove Change One Thing* | 2016 *My Beauty My Say* | 2020 *Show Us* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Story | girls' anxiety | girls using Dove and getting confident customers | girls having negative self-esteem | women being judged by others | women proposing a new vision of beauty |
| Narrator | Dove | | girls | young women | women at all ages |
| Lexical choices | every girl | next Dove girl | our girls | / | girl |
| Suppression | absent subjects | / | / | / | / |
| Word connotation | change their mind' | surprise yourself | change | / | shatter the stereotype |
| Number | / | / | / | 100% | 70% |
| Sentence pattern | (No subject) hates / thinks wishes / afraid | A Dove girl is confident / beautiful / free … | 1. I wish I had 2. I'd love to 3. I like to | 1. They said 2. They looked at me 3. They thought 4. He said 5. They would | A beauty version where… |
| Structural oppositions | / | other girls VS Dove girls | / | 'they' / 'he' VS females | an old vision of beauty VS a new vision of beauty |
| Theme | Negative self-evaluation | Changes in Personality | Negative self-evaluation and expectation | Negative comments on appearance and job from others | Expectation & Attitudes |

### 4.2 Discursive Practice

In the second dimension, the study examines the values and attitudes in the compositions of words. Dove, as a text maker, chose some words with implicit connotations according to its interest and to frame its advertisements (Machin & Mayr, 2012). By examining the linguistic choices used to describe social actors and events, the present study interprets what female identities the text makers intended to construct and the goals they fulfilled.

In terms of the linguistic features signifying an interaction with the audience, it can be inferred that Dove is mainly devoted to raising public awareness of the harsh situation of the impossible standard of female beauty. However, such attitudes were not directly conveyed at the beginning of the 'Real Beauty' campaign. Although the campaign started in 2004, it took about a decade for Dove to present straight-forward information to deliver more forceful information. In terms of the nomination of the audience, it experienced a devious process. Dove once tried to name a small number of girls as well as their customers 'Dove girls.' The exclusiveness of labeling was diminished in their newest release in which the meaning maker directly spoke to all girls. The latest advertisement showed a stronger advocation to align and communicate by saying, 'girl, you're so young, but you see everything' and '…if we show you a world where every woman is seen, then girl, you'll show us all.' The positioning here refers to synthetic personalization (Fairclough, 1989)[2] that gives a feeling of treating each individual among all the audiences seriously.

Such reinforcing tone can also be found in lexical choices and number games. Firstly, in the lexical choices, Dove reinforced the tone of their attitudes by finally saying 'shatter the stereotype.' Compared with other expressions like 'change,' 'shatter' helped to enhance females' determination to break the fixed ideas defining

what beauty is. Secondly, Dove presented numbers to shows its' attitudes towards change in the advertisements newly released. For example, it indicated that '70% of women still don't see themselves represented in media or advertising'. Although the data seemed subjective, the presence of 'number game' helped to increase the credibility and reinforce the effect of persuasion (van Dijk, 2000).[8] Overall, Dove's advertising presented a progressive signal to intensify the values conveyed in advertising and had a steadfast attitude to unite all females to make a change.

### 4.3 Social Practice

In the third dimension, the study investigates how language creates opinions. Fairclough (1989) [2]suggested that the explanation should focus on 'the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation, and their social effects.' To explore what social relationships were presented in Dove's femvertising, the analysis mainly employs Machin and Mayr's structural oppositions (2012). According to them, text producers used some words on purpose to build contrasts between different groups. The language denoting such opposite relationships may imply or emphasize their differences. Based on these five pieces of femvertising, Dove has gradually attempted to make sense of complicated social relationships influencing females' recognition of self-identity by purposefully building the antagonistic relationship between female and patriarchal social conditions.

In the early femvertising from 2006 to 2015, Dove solely contributed to describing how terrible women's negative self-evaluation was. Although it advocated for the world to reflect on this phenomenon, it failed to use more accurate and more powerful language to challenge the authority who has laid such judgmental influence. Furthermore, in the advertisements released in recent years, Dove began to criticize the voices that lowered women's self-esteem. The structural opposition used by Dove can be extended to the 'ideological squaring' of van Dijk (2000).[8] In the language used, it drew a distinct line between 'they/he' and the female, emphasizing 'Their' bad. The portrait was informative to reveal the fact that women's negative evaluation of themselves cannot only be attributed to themselves, and it was subject to the whole beauty standard of society. It also mentioned the imbalanced judgment of women's working capabilities, which considers prettier women as less capable of work. In this sense, Dove made a breakthrough that brought us to a female's battle of career, which was first seen across the videos released since 2006.

### 5. Conclusion

The language used in Dove's femvertising has experienced a discursive construction of the conflicts between female negative self-evaluation and social judgment. At the beginning of the 'Real Beauty' campaign, Dove only pointed out the problem that many females had. It did not reveal the social-cultural reasons why they had such a pessimistic self-evaluation. As Windels et al. (2020) [9]criticized, Dove did not provide enough solutions for women and support them in the political arena. However, in the advertisements released in the recent five years, Dove began to imply that the negative comments from patriarchal society partially caused the female's low self-esteem. It also focused on criticizing the male voices that overstressed one standard of beauty and overlooked females' ability. Dove's voice defending women seems to get more pungent and robust than before. At present, it is undeniable that the language used by Dove has managed to empower women with the autonomy to control the vision of beauty and provide solutions to unite women of all ages and with all colors.

With a few powerful and insightful advertisements appearing recently, Dove can refute the accusation of 'undermining feminism' (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003).[4] While other beauty brands convinced customers to be empowered by purchasing certain products (Windels et al., 2020),[9] Dove gradually diminished the presentation of products and their influence. It has mainly focused on delivering a message to unify females and obtain the control of beauty authority. Without its' brand logo on the video, it would be much more like public educational advertisements. Nevertheless, at the basic level, the purpose of these ad campaigns was not so much to 'sell' particular products, but instead they were all about brand associations – attempts to get consumers to associate the Dove brand with the notion of female empowerment.

However, despite the promising advertisements discussed above, it is worth mentioning that Dove focused excessively on pro-female construction and overlooked the equal authority to claim the beauty standards of both the female and male. Its structural oppositions made between male and female indeed presented an equivocal understanding of feminism, indicating that only females were suffering from biased judgment. It ignored the phenomenon that males also had the same appearance anxiety affected by female's comments. It is reasonable to consider such new changes have been made to cater to 'consumer culture' because of a large number of female customers (Xu & Tian, 2020). [11]

Lastly, there are several limitations. Firstly, the study only examines a tiny amount of data. The conclusion cannot be generalized to other care brands. Secondly, the study fails to provide a readers' perspective to interpret, although the researcher is indeed a 'reader' and indeed the target audience. Thirdly, the study does not take account of other semiotic resources in the advertisement. For future studies, it is suggested to use multimodal discourse analysis to involve more data and use ethnographical approaches to provide the audience's reaction. Regarding the interplay in advertising discourses, some pro-male advertisements are essential to explore. With all discussions on the construction of the female and male in advertising, we hope that all genders and identities are appreciated in a society where everyone feels free to be different and has an inalienable right to own his or her own beauty standards.

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