



A Morpho-Syntactic Analysis of Gender-Fair Language in Advertisements of Cosmetic Products in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Gender-fair language challenges and dismantles prevailing societal gender preconceptions. Cosmetic advertisements have been criticized for unfair language choices that perpetuate gender stereotypes. This study is a morphosyntactic examination of gender-fair language in cosmetic advertisements. The social constructionist theory underpins the study. Thirty (30) product packages and labels for the Ghanaian market were used in this qualitative descriptive survey. Gendered terms were analyzed on the morphological level using Quirk et al.'s (1985) functional principle of word categorization. The data collected revealed that Gender-unfair language is prevalent in cosmetic advertisements. Product names, descriptions and claims often use gendered nouns, pronouns, adjectives, phrases of different types and imperative clauses. This reinforces the idea that certain beauty concerns and products are exclusively tailored to specific genders. Gender-unfair language in cosmetic advertisements results in a limited representation of beauty ideals and practices. The use of inclusive language and representations that challenge gender stereotypes and promote diversity was recommended for cosmetic advertisers. The paper provides insight into academic discourse and practical approaches in gender, communication and marketing studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender-fair language, according to Wollenschlaeger et al. entails the use of language and imagery that eliminates gender prejudices, empowers persons of all genders, and provides a fairer representation of people in ad campaigns.¹ Gender-inclusive language is consistent with the goals of equality and social progress. Akestam opines that advertising that promotes non-discriminatory language and images can help create a more inclusive society.² The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) of the United Kingdom has for instance instituted various frameworks to reflect the growing recognition of the need for linguistic inclusivity and the responsibility of advertisers to promote gender equality.³

Eisend has indicated that gender-neutral language is exceedingly difficult for advertisers to implement.⁴ According to UN Women, "...it is important to note that the concern about how advertising reproduces sociocultural patterns that reinforce gender inequalities is not an entirely new concern in the global sector."⁵

¹ Daniel Wollenschlaeger, I. Unkel, and Nedra Weinreich, "Gender-Fair Language and Advertising: An Experiment on Memory and Evaluations of Gendered Language in a Commercial." *Journal of Advertising Research* 61, no. 1 (2021): 91–107.

² Nina Akestam, "Understanding Advertising Stereotypes. Social and Brand-Related Effects of Stereotyped versus Non-Stereotyped Portrayals in Advertising" (Stockholm School of Economics, 2017).

³ Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), "Depicting Gender Stereotypes Likely to Cause Harm or Serious Widespread Offense," 2019, <https://www.asa.org.uk/resource/depicting-gender-stereotypes-in-advertisement.html>.

⁴ Martin Eisend, "A Meta-Analysis of Gender Roles in Advertising." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 38 (2010): 418–40.

⁵ UN Women, *Advertising and Stereotypes. A High-Risk Relationship* (Argentina: United Nations, 2021).

Kaur et al. further state that language difficulties and varying grammar rules of different languages have long been a difficulty for beauty product/cosmetic marketing.⁶ Cosmetic commercials, as reported by Kaur et al. and Bai, have long been chastised for supporting unattainable beauty standards and promoting gender stereotypes.⁷

Linguistically, cosmetic commercials frequently perpetuate gender stereotypes. Bui and Han found in their respective studies that terms that stipulate that women must strive for an unrealistic ideal of beauty in advertisements, regularly include words such as ‘flawless’, ‘age-defying’ and ‘perfect skin’.⁸ Bui observed in his study that advertisements aimed towards males, on the other hand, may include words like ‘powerful’, ‘strong’, and ‘assertive’. These terms reinforce conventional masculine stereotypes.⁹

Kaur et al. report that advertisers continue to use gender stereotypes in their promotion of cosmetic items to improve their marketing strategy, meet society's expectations and keep up with media trends.¹⁰ According to Akestam, stereotyping and gender prejudices might be viewed as a marketing tactic for aligning items with perceived customer preferences and societal expectations.¹¹ It is for this reason that Behnam and Zamanian state that advertisers may feel obligated to reinforce ingrained cultural assumptions around gender roles for their messages to be relevant and well-received.¹²

Language has been a powerful tool that has reinforced gender unfairness in advertising. There have been many studies on language and gender issues in advertisements. These include studies done in America by Kilbourne and Jhally and Storck-Walker, in Germany by Wollenschlaeger et al., in Australia by Kaur et al. and Winch and Martin, in Vietnam by Bui, in China by Bai, in Canada by Hu et al., in Sweden by Yang and in Iran by Behnam and Zamanian.¹³ A few of these studies have examined gender-fair language and biases. These studies, except for Bai, have not paid attention to the morphosyntactic features of language in cosmetic advertisements.¹⁴ According to Van Valin and LaPolla, morphosyntactic analysis provides linguists with a method for discovering the principles and patterns that control how words are generated and how they combine to form coherent sentences.¹⁵ This method leads to a better understanding of the grammatical structures and principles that underpin language.

In Ghana where the current study is situated, literature is replete with evidence of language of advertisement in the Ghanaian media. These include studies by Afreh, Baidoo and Afreh, Mensah et al. and Anim-Ayeko which explored metaphorical representations in advertisements. Ganaa studied formal properties of English used in TV advertisements, Adzovie et al. and Asante investigated the language of alcoholic advertisements, Torto et al., Nchindila and Torto and Essel whose works explored persuasive language in advertisements, Akorli et al. and Torto looked at lexical devices in print media and Mensah and Assibey et al. who gave attention to pragmatic and discourse approaches in advertisements.¹⁶ None of these studies ascertained

⁶ Sarjit Kaur and Gurnam Kaur Sidhu, “Evaluating the Critical Literacy Practices of Tertiary Students,” *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 123 (2014): 44–52.

⁷ Kaur and Sidhu, “Evaluating the Critical Literacy Practices of Tertiary Students.”

⁸ Van Bui, “Gender Language in Modern Advertising: An Investigation,” *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences* 2 (November 2021): 100008, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2020.100008>; Chung-ah Han, “A Study on the Women Image Expressions of Cosmetic Advertisements through the Digital Media,” *Journal of Fashion Business* 8, no. 3 (2004): 70–83.

⁹ Bui, “Gender Language in Modern Advertising: An Investigation.”

¹⁰ Kuldip Kaur, Nalini Arumugam, and Norimah Mohamad Yunus, “Beauty Product Advertisements: A Critical Discourse Analysis,” *Asian Social Science* 9, no. 3 (2013): 61–71.

¹¹ Akestam, “Understanding Advertising Stereotypes. Social and Brand-Related Effects of Stereotyped versus Non-Stereotyped Portrayals in Advertising.”

¹² Biook Behnam and Jafar Zamanian, “Gender and the Discourse of Advertising in English and Persian Magazine Advertisements,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 4, no. 11 (2014): 1.

¹³ Jean Kilbourne and Sut Jhally, “Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity: From Eminem to Clinique for Men,” *The Journal of Gender Race & Justice* 22, no. 2 (2019): 349–84; Jerome Storck-Walker, “Gender Stereotypes in Advertising: A Review of Research on Stereotyping in Advertisements,” *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising* 41, no. 3 (2020): 243–59; Wollenschlaeger, Unkel, and Weinreich, “Gender-Fair Language and Advertising: An Experiment on Memory and Evaluations of Gendered Language in a Commercial”; Kaur and Sidhu, “Evaluating the Critical Literacy Practices of Tertiary Students”; Peter Winch and C. Martin, “Gender Representation in Advertising: A Longitudinal Analysis of Gender Portrayals in Australian Television Advertisements,” *Journal of Marketing Communications* 26, no. 6 (2020): 637–56; Bui, “Gender Language in Modern Advertising: An Investigation.”

¹⁴ Zhihong Bai, “The Characteristics of Language in Cosmetic Advertisements,” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 8, no. 7 (2018): 841–47.

¹⁵ Richard D. Jr. Van Valin and Randy J. LaPolla, *Syntax, Structure, Meaning and Function* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Esther Serwaah Afreh, “A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Metaphors in Selected Advertisements by Some Financial Institutions in Ghana,” in *Online Proceedings of UK-CLA Meetings*, vol. 4, 2017, 293–312; Dei D. Baidoo and Esther S. Afreh, “Metaphor: A Linguistic Tool for Persuasion in Some Advertisements of Vodafone, the Second Major Telecommunication Company in Ghana,” *Journal for Research Scholars and Professionals of English Language Teaching* 6, no. 32 (2022): 1–13; Dorah Mensah, Gabriel K. Ankrah, and Kwabena B. Amponsem, “Exploring the Role of Conceptual Metaphor in Expounding Social Roles and Values in Contents of Billboard Adverts in Ghana,” *World Wide Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development* 7, no. 6 (2021): 84–

gender-fair language, particularly in cosmetic advertisements. The closest was Adzovie et al. who undertook a semiotic analysis of gender representation in the advertisement of a local alcoholic beverage.¹⁷

The authors have already shown that cosmetic advertisements continue to be criticized for gender unfairness. A linguistic analysis, therefore, is needed to shed light and offer current evidence on how cosmetic advertisers continue to perpetuate or challenge gender unfairness in marketing their products. Based on the evidence gathered, attention has not been given to morphosyntactic features of gender-fair language in cosmetic advertisements, both in Ghana and other areas. The present study, hence, fills this gap, with a morphosyntactic analysis of gender-fair language in cosmetic advertisements.

This study is set to examine gender-fair language in advertisements with specific reference to cosmetic products. The objectives are to:

- i. identify gendered terms and constructs prevalent in cosmetic advertisements.
- ii. analyze the syntactic structures employed to convey gendered messages in cosmetic advertisements.
- iii. investigate the morphological features employed to differentiate gendered terms and constructs in cosmetic advertisements.
- iv. examine the implications of language gendering for perpetuating or challenging gender stereotypes in cosmetic advertisements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework – Social Constructionist Theory

The social constructionist theory underpins this research. According to Foucault, the theory proposes that different parts of human reality, such as social phenomena which include gender, are not ‘natural’ or preset, but rather engineered by societal and cultural dynamics.¹⁸ According to Foucault, the theory contends that humans construct meaning and attribute value to ideas, identities, and institutions collectively.¹⁹ Several essential assumptions underlie social constructionist theory. According to Berger and Luckmann, social interactions, language, cultural practices and historical settings impact the human view of reality.²⁰ Second, Foucault recognizes language as an important factor in the construction and maintenance of social reality.²¹ Words, concepts, narratives, and discourses are employed in the formation and reinforcement of social norms, personalities and power dynamics.

Morphosyntactic analysis, within the social constructionist theory, investigates the structure, forms, and grammar of language. It investigates how these language characteristics contribute to the formation, reinforcement, or subversion of social realities such as gender roles. The theory is used to investigate how linguistic gender tags, vocabulary selections and syntactical trends reflect and maintain gender conventions and power relations. It also looks at how language is used to assign dominant or subordinate gender identities, promote gender stereotypes, or question long-held gender norms.

Cosmetic Advertisements

The central goal of cosmetic advertisements is to boost brand visibility and generate sales in the competitive beauty business. According to Lee and Heere, cosmetic advertisers want to generate a strong brand image and promote brand loyalty by positioning their goods as the solution to consumers' beauty needs.²² These advertisements' persuasive language and imagery appeal to consumers' wishes for elegance, confidence, and

91; Joyce Anim-Ayeko, “Metaphor in Politics: A Verbal and Non-Verbal Analysis of Selected Political Advertisements in the Ghanaian Print Media” (University of Ghana, 2012); Faustina Ethel Ganaa, “English in Adverts in Ghana,” *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, December 31, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.24940/theijhss/2022/v10/i12/HS2212-022>; Daniel Edem Adzovie, Rita Holm Adzovie, and Enoch Boateng, “Gender in Audio-Visual Advertisements in Ghana: A Semiotics Analysis,” 2019; Samuel O. A. Asante, “The Language of Alcoholic Advertisement in Ghana” (University of Education, 2020); Bernard M Nchindila and Richard T Torto, “Persuasive Effect of Figures of Speech in the English of Advertisements in the Ghanaian Press,” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 10, no. 5 (2020): 492–509; Maame E. Y. Essel, “The Use of Persuasive Techniques in the Contents of Ghanaian Advertisement: An Exploratory Case Study of Tasty Tom Ntoso and Alomo Bitters Twa Bi Gye Wo De3 Promo Adverts on United Television (UTV),” *New Media and Mass Communication* 98 (2021): 13–21; Gideon K. Akorli, Bruce S. Kpeglo, and Veronica S. Ofofu, “The Language of Advertising: Analysis of Lexical Devices in MTN Ghana Print Advertisement,” *International Journal of Applied Research* 4, no. 10 (2020): 396–405.

¹⁷ Adzovie, Adzovie, and Boateng, “Gender in Audio-Visual Advertisements in Ghana: A Semiotics Analysis.”

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* (Vintage Books, 1963).

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (Pantheon Books, 1969).

²⁰ Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966).

²¹ Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*.

²² Lee, Seunghwan and Heere, Bob. “Exploring the relative effectiveness of emotional, rational, and combination advertising appeals on sport consumer behavior. *Sport Marketing Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2018): 82–92.

social validation, resulting in emotional ties with the brand and products. Furthermore, cosmetic commercials influence how society sees beauty and self-image by setting beauty standards and trends.

According to Leech, the role of language in advertising is to communicate sentiments, provide advice, enlighten and convince, depict or construct.²³ He further states that 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”. Bai provides a detailed description of the language of cosmetic advertisements.²⁴ He avers, “As a special one type of advertising, cosmetic advertising language can be a non-personal communication of information between the potential consumers and advertisers (especially women), which includes the title and contents of cosmetic advertising and aims to make their cosmetic brand, products and service known to all and urge the consumer to buy their products through the media.” Cosmetic advertisers end up propagating gender stereotypes in their efforts to convey information about items, encourage customers to make decisions, and ultimately, to buy things. According to Kilbourne and Jhally, cosmetic advertising depends on cultural clichés that are typically stereotyped.²⁵

Related Studies

Bai described the language of cosmetic advertisements from lexical, rhetorical and sentence levels.²⁶ According to the report, the lexical choices of cosmetic advertisements make the language informative, concise and euphemistic. At the sentence level, the report indicated that simple sentences, imperatives and rhetorical questions were used to improve the products’ appeal. Bai’s work simply describes the linguistic choices of the text without accounting for gender-fair language in the discourse.

Bui explored gender language in modern advertising.²⁷ The study revealed that men’s products (including shampoo, perfume, jeans, deodorant and sunglasses) were described with words such as strong, powerful, dry, expensive, cool, masculine, luxurious and elegant while women’s products were described with words such as tender, graceful, soft, slender, slim, colorful, gentle, skinny, fashionable and passionate. The vocabulary choice of modern advertisements, in the view of Bui, reinforces gender unfairness.

Kaur et al. focused on the use of language to manipulate consumers of body products.²⁸ Their study, which was a critical discourse analysis, found that there was a high use of the second-person personal pronoun and possessive pronouns to establish a direct link with readers/customers. Imperatives were also found to have been used to persuade readers to buy the products. Verbs, nouns, repetitions, synonyms, adjectives and modalities were used to present reality to customers. Kaur et al. concluded that the linguistic choices of cosmetic advertisements projected the ideology of beauty and portrayed an ideal appearance for women.

Yang’s work examined gender differences in magazine advertisements. It was found that non-neutral nouns and adjectives were used to attract specific genders.²⁹ Texts in female ads were found to be verbose. The study reported that words such as daring, adventurous and willing to take risks projected men as brave while the emotions of women were appealed to using words such as gentle, sensitive, warm, tender and affectionate. The study concluded that magazine advertisements reinforced gender differences and perpetuated social and biological stereotypes. Behnam and Zamanian also found that in English and Persian magazine advertisements, women, in Persian magazines, are explicitly portrayed as wives and mothers than it was done in English magazines.³⁰ The study also found that women, in English magazines, are presented as nude models. In both magazines, the portrayal of women reinforced their unrealistic image of being sexually desired by men, attractive, young and thin.

Adzovie et al.’s semiotic analysis explored gender representation in the audio-visual ad of Adonko bitters, a Ghanaian alcoholic beverage, produced by Samdackus Initiative.³¹ The study found that the audio-visual ad of Adonko bitters presented women as dependent, feeble and objects intended to satisfy men. Men are presented as rulers and women as servants.

²³ Geoffrey N. Leech, *English in Advertising. A Linguistic Study of Advertising in Great Britain* (London: Longman, 1972).

²⁴ Bai, “The Characteristics of Language in Cosmetic Advertisements.”

²⁵ Kilbourne and Jhally, “Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity: From Eminem to Clinique for Men.”

²⁶ Bai, “The Characteristics of Language in Cosmetic Advertisements”; Bui, “Gender Language in Modern Advertising: An Investigation.”

²⁷ Bui, “Gender Language in Modern Advertising: An Investigation.”

²⁸ Kaur, Arumugam, and Yunus, “Beauty Product Advertisements: A Critical Discourse Analysis.”

²⁹ Jie Yang, “Gender Differences in Advertisements. A Study of Adjectives and Nouns in the Language of Advertisements,” 2010, <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:397162/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

³⁰ Behnam and Zamanian, “Gender and the Discourse of Advertising in English and Persian Magazine Advertisements.”

³¹ Adzovie, Adzovie, and Boateng, “Gender in Audio-Visual Advertisements in Ghana: A Semiotics Analysis.”

METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Approach

This study is a descriptive survey using the qualitative approach. Creswell explains that descriptive design describes the present condition of occurrences, events and phenomena.³² Based on Creswell's explanation, the researchers assumed that the descriptive survey design was appropriate for the study. The study adopted a morphosyntactic approach. The qualitative method was used because according to Fraenkel et al., it involves researchers going to the natural setting and dealing with unstructured information.³³ The method also explores reasons, people's behaviour, value systems and attitudes rather than merely describing them. This study explored how the language of advertisement conveys gendered terms and examines how it perpetuates or challenges gender stereotypes. The findings are not presented in statistical formulas. Statistical values are, however, used to present sections of the results.

Corpus Type and Selection

The corpus for the study comprised cosmetic product packages and labels. The products include oral care, skin care, sun care, hair care, decorative, body care and perfumes. Most of the cosmetic products had labels written in both English and French, with a few other labels having a third translation. The English language was the predominant language used in writing the products' packages and labels. Afreh et al. assert that for health communication, the global nature of the English language and its wide speakership make it an effective lingua franca for information dissemination.³⁴ This rationale clarifies its choice by cosmetic advertisers. Product packages and labels in English were used for the study.

The study used thirty (30) product packages and labels. The products were collected mainly from accredited pharmaceutical shops and cosmetic outlets within the Kumasi metropolis and other areas. The researchers engaged the owners and attendants of the shops and outlets and sought permission to sample the needed products. A photograph of each product was taken since they were still on the shelves for sale. The selection of the products was done using purposive and convenience sampling techniques.

Analytical Procedure

The study used content analysis. Krinpendorff describes content analysis as an analytical procedure that determines the presence of certain theme patterns, words and concepts in qualitative data.³⁵ The researchers read and observed the data keeping an eye out for gendered terms and expressions. A second reading of the data was done to confirm and modify the identified gendered terms and expressions. Quirk et al.'s functional principle for categorizing words was used to analyze and catalogue gendered terms at the morphological level.³⁶ The functional principle for word categorization considers the grammatical environment of words in their categorization. The context of use determines the word's class. The functional principle, as illustrated by Afreh et al., is "the obvious choice for making any thorough analysis of the word class of words in English."³⁷ To describe gendered terms and constructions at the syntactic level, Chomsky's theory of syntax was adopted.³⁸ In his approach to syntax, Chomsky provides a full formal account of language structure based on rules and symbols. He uses phrase structure rules breaking down into smaller parts. His rules account for the various constituents and structures of every language.

FINDINGS

Out of the thirty (30) sampled cosmetic products, five (5) were fragrance/toiletries, two (2) were hair care products, three (3) were facial care products and twenty (20) were skin/sun care products from different brands. There were six (6) products marked solely as women's products while three (3) products were marked as men's products. The remaining twenty-one (21) products were not marked as either men's or women's products, hence they were considered to be unisex.

³² Jack R. Fraenkel, Norman E. Wallen, and Helen H. Hyun, *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012).

³³ Esther Serwaah Afreh, Osei Yaw Akoto, and Kodwo Adam-Moses, "Hedging Strategies in Health Discourse: A Study of Pharmaceutical Leaflets," *Journal of Asia TEFL* 14, no. 3 (2017): 515.

³⁴ Afreh, Akoto, and Adam-Moses, "Hedging Strategies in Health Discourse: A Study of Pharmaceutical Leaflets."

³⁵ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004).

³⁶ Randolph Quirk et al., *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (New York: Longman, 1985).

³⁷ Afreh, Akoto, and Adam-Moses, "Hedging Strategies in Health Discourse: A Study of Pharmaceutical Leaflets."

³⁸ Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (MIT press, 2014).

Gendered Terms and Constructs in Cosmetic Ads

The data showed varied terms and constructs used in the labels of cosmetic products to perpetuate gender stereotypes. These terms explicitly or implicitly carried gendered messages, hence categorized as gendered. Some prevalent gendered terms and constructs are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Gendered terms and constructs

Product Type	Gendered term/construct
Fragrance/toiletries	“power house”, “Tungsten strength”
Hair care products	“dye more unified”
Facial care products	“your gentle skin”, “lightening care”, “soothes and softens”, “visibly radiant”, “white secret”
Skin/sun care products	“be beautiful”, “apply to your body”, “sensitive skins”, “radiant complexion”, “black skin”, “buttery soft skin”, “softer, smoother, and shiny skin”, “moisturize”, “during and after pregnancy”, “lightening and whitening”, “unifying, toning and sun guard”, “age defying”, “whitening lotion”, “boosts skins”, “African-American women”, “perfect skin”, “younger-looking silky skin”, “strong and shiny”, “skin perfecter”, “burst of radiance”, “skin more luminous”, “tender white”, “smooth, light and firm skin”, “tonifies”, “stay young”.

Source: Field data, 2023.

The terms “whitening lotion”, “age defying” and “unifying, toning and sun guard” are commonly associated with beauty products marketed towards women for achieving a fairer and more even skin tone. These phrases and terms align with beauty concerns traditionally marketed toward women. The expression “visibly radiant, smooth and even skin tone” may also be considered gendered. This reinforces traditional beauty ideals marketed towards women. The phrase emphasizes qualities like radiance, smoothness and evenness which are often associated with women’s skincare goals.

The term “Be beautiful” which is considered to be gendered is used to describe a skincare product. This is illustrated in extract (1) from a product’s label:

1. “A special formulation prevents skin dryness and takes good care of your gentle skin...Be beautiful and clear. Pure skin.” [CL 01]

The term “beautiful” is often associated with appearance and aesthetics. In this context, it implies that the user should aspire to be visually attractive or conform to certain beauty standards, which is a gendered expectation typically directed toward women. The expression “your gentle skin” suggests that the product is designed to cater specifically to delicate or sensitive skin, a characteristic often associated with women’s skin. It assumes a gendered stereotype about skin type and implies that women have inherently more sensitive or delicate skin.

In a skincare product, the following expression illustrated in extract (2), was used on its label:

2. “Tender White boosts skin metabolism, improves cellular activity and helps to remove spots and freckles to achieve beautiful, unified skin tone” [CL 12]

The label conveys an implicit gendered message. The expression “tender white”, which is the product’s name, may not convey an explicit gendered message. However, the context of promoting a product that boosts skin metabolism, improves skin tone and targets spots and freckles may be associated with women’s beauty routines and appearance-related concerns. The product also uses the terms “skin lightener agent” and “masterfully blended” to convey implicit gendered messages. The context of skin lightening and the use of natural oils may align with beauty standards that have been historically directed toward women. These terms and constructions, therefore, implicitly convey gendered messages targeted at women.

Another product also uses the pronoun “he” in its description. This is illustrated in extract (3):

3. “He has an express peel that regenerates effectively the epidermis...Developed with the utmost care by Morgan & Thompson laboratory.” [CL 05]

Referring to the product as “he” gives it a gendered attribute, personifying it as male. This can be seen as gender-unfair language because it assigns a specific gender to an inanimate object, which is not inherently gendered. The use of “he” might imply that the product is primarily targeted toward male consumers or could be associated with masculine characteristics and potentially limiting its appeal to other gender identities. The further use of the personal pronoun “Morgan & Thompson” corroborates the gendered appeal of the product. The use of the personal pronoun gives the impression that the product was developed by a specific entity [a company]. While the developers are not explicitly assigned a gender, the use of personal pronouns can inadvertently perpetuate

the stereotype of men being more commonly associated with scientific or technical fields, such as laboratories and research.

The term “*African-American women*” is also used in the following label of a skincare product as found in the extract (4):

4. “*Discover the beauty secret of African American women for perfect skin.*” [CL 12]

The term, “*African-American women*”, explicitly refers to a specific gender and ethnic group. This phrase targets women and suggests that the product’s benefits are tailored to meet the skincare needs of African-American women. It also suggests that African-American women who are the audience for the product’s beauty secret have specific skincare concerns and beauty needs. Another product also explicitly refers to individuals with black skin.

This is found in the extract (5):

5. “*Caretone is a body lotion lightening and unifying, specially designed for black skin*” [CL 06]

The phrase explicitly targets individuals with black skin. This suggests that the product is specifically formulated for a particular racial or ethnic group. The use of the term “*specially designed*” can be seen as gender-neutral, but the phrase as a whole indicates that the product is intended for black individuals, possibly implying that it is not suitable for individuals of other racial backgrounds or those with other skin pigments. The use of the term “*whitening body care*” may implicitly target women as skin lightening has historically been associated with beauty standards directed towards women.

The term is used in the label as illustrated in extract (6):

6. “*This multi-function whitening body care unifies, corrects, protects, brightens and hydrates your skin in one step.*” [CL 12]

The use of the expression “*your skin*” in reference to the audience can also be perceived as gendered, assuming that the primary consumers are women. The context of unifying, brightening, and protecting skin aligns with beauty routines traditionally associated with women. This expression and others identified in the product labels align with traditional gender norms and beauty standards associated with women. The focus on skin lightening, unifying skin tone and addressing specific skin concerns may inadvertently perpetuate gendered beauty ideals and expectations.

The gendered nature of these terms and expressions arises from the historical marketing strategies that have often targeted women as the primary consumers of skincare and beauty products. The language used to describe the products’ benefits and effects reinforces traditional beauty ideals, which may perpetuate gender norms and expectations surrounding appearance and beauty routines.

There were also gendered terms and expressions targeted at men. This included terms and names such as “*NIVEA Men*” and “*Day by Day Men*”. The term “*Men*” is explicitly gendered and indicates that the product line is specifically targeted towards male consumers. By using “*Men*” in the product name, the brand communicates that these products are intended for men’s use, thereby reinforcing the gender association.

Gender-Neutral Terms

Though most of the terms and constructs identified in the cosmetic labels were implicitly or explicitly gendered, a handful of the terms were also explicitly gender-neutral. Terms such as “*Gold skin*”, “*improving skin aspect*”, “*diminish and prevent imperfection*” and “*smooth, supple and radiant skin*” may be perceived as gender-neutral in the context of skincare products that aim to improve overall skin appearance and health. The phrase “*Gold Skin Body Lotion with Argan oil*”, however, may be interpreted as a product targeted towards both men and women.

The use of product names by some products also communicated gender-neutral messages. The product names themselves such as “*Rexona*”, “*Ever sheen hand and body lotion*” and “*Cocoa-care body lotion*” do not carry any inherent gender connotations. They are neutral and do not indicate a gender-specific target audience. For these products, the language used in their label does not make assumptions about the gender of the consumers. The terms are not tailored towards a specific gender or associated with any traditional gender stereotypes. The products focus on their features, giving a general description of the product applying to anyone seeking those specific benefits of the product. This is illustrated in extract (7) below:

7. “*Rexona. Free spirit. 3X stronger protection...work more effectively on your underarm skin...*” [CL 23]

Syntactic Structures Conveying Gendered Messages

Gendered Noun Phrases

The use of gendered nouns in product names and descriptions creates noun phrases that explicitly specify the target audience based on gender. For example, phrases like “*NIVEA Men*” “*Day by day Men*” or “*Women’s*”

skin” convey gendered messages by associating the products with specific genders. These gendered noun phrases link cosmetic products to specific gender identities. This reinforces the idea that certain beauty and grooming needs are linked to being male or female. Other instances of gendered noun phrases from the data were:

8. “*Bella Special Body Lotion with Cocoa Butter*” [CL 10]
9. “*NIVEA Men Dry Impact*” [CL 28]
10. “*Stay Young Skin Lightening Cream*” [CL 20]
11. “*Ever Sheen Hand and Body Lotion*” [CL 24]

In (8), “Bella” is a female name, suggesting that the body lotion is specifically targeted towards women. The use of “*special body lotion*” further emphasizes its gendered marketing. In (10), the noun phrase “*NIVEA Men*” directly points to men as the target consumers. The inclusion of “*Men*” specifies the gender for which the product is intended. The noun phrase “*stay young*” is used in extract (10) to imply that the product is targeted towards a youthful audience, and the use of “*Skin Lightening Cream*” suggests that it may be associated with beauty standards perpetuated by gendered marketing. In extract (11), the noun phrase “*Ever Sheen*” could be interpreted as promoting a notion of constant beauty and youthfulness, which is often associated with female-targeted beauty products. The label perpetuates gender messages and is biased towards the female gender.

Gendered Imperatives

Imperative sentences are used in product descriptions to give commands or instructions. They give instructions to potential customers. Imperative clauses in the product descriptions also convey gendered messages by indicating for whom the product is intended or what specific beauty routines are recommended for each gender. When gendered imperatives are employed, it reinforces the idea that specific beauty practices or products are targeted towards a particular gender. Extracts 12-15 illustrate this:

12. “*Use this for smoother shave*” [CL 29]
13. “*Apply this to reduce wrinkles*” [CL 21]
14. “*Try this for a refreshed look*” [CL 13]
15. “*Apply this daily for youthful skin*” [CL 20]

The use of imperatives, as illustrated in (12), (13), (14) and (15) may implicitly suggest gender messages as used in the products’ descriptions. In these imperatives, specific beauty routines or practices targeted towards a particular gender are suggested. This renders the language to be gender unfair, favoring a particular gender group over the other.

Gendered Prepositional Phrases

Prepositional phrases also convey gendered messages in cosmetic advertisements. Phrases such as “*for men’s grooming*” or “*for her radiant skin*” suggest that certain cosmetic products cater exclusively to specific genders. Another extract to illustrate the use of prepositional phrases to convey gendered messages is shown in the sentence (16):

16. “*Apply it twice a day all over the body, insisting on hands, elbows and knees...Day by day Men body milk moisturizes without the shine and gives an immediate healthy glow effect*” [CL 30]

The prepositional phrase “all over the body” in extract (16) is gender-neutral, but the subsequent phrase “insisting on hands, elbows and knees” might indirectly imply that these areas are of particular concern for men’s skincare routines. The prepositional phrase “without the shine” suggests that men may not prefer a shiny appearance. It implies a gendered message related to societal beauty standards for men.

Morphological Features of Gendered Terms and Constructs

Gendered Nouns/Product Names

The use of gendered terms like “*Men*”, “*Women*”, “*For Him*”, or “*For Her*” in the names of cosmetic products explicitly links these items to specific genders. By doing so, cosmetic brands reinforce the notion that certain beauty and grooming needs are inherently tied to a person’s gender identity. For example, products labelled as “*NIVEA Men*” or “*Women’s Whitening Cream*” suggest these items are specifically tailored for either men or women, perpetuating the idea that gender determines skincare requirements. The use of other names such as “*Men’s Face Wash*” and “*Women’s Body Lotion*” immediately signals that the product is gender specific. These naming conventions reinforce the idea that beauty is linked to gender. The brands conspicuously convey the message that certain cosmetic concerns are relevant to one gender more than the other.

Gendered Pronouns

Some product descriptions include gendered pronouns like “his”, “hers”, “he” or “she” to specify the intended audience. For instance, a product may claim to be “*perfect for his rough skin*” or “*nourishing for her delicate complexion*”, reinforcing gender-specific beauty concerns. By using gendered pronouns, cosmetic brands imply that men and women have distinct cosmetic needs and that certain products are more suitable for one gender over the other. Such pronouns are used to specifically identify a particular gender. Such identification seeks to give prominence to a particular gender group and project a certain beauty ideal traditionally associated with it. This renders the message of the brand or product gender unfair.

Adjectives with Gendered Connotations

Some adjectives used in the product descriptions may have gendered connotations, linking specific qualities to a particular gender. For instance, terms like “*strong*”, “*soft*”, “*delicate*” or “*rugged*” may be associated with men or women, reinforcing gender stereotypes. Terms such as “*strong*”, “*rugged*”, or “*intense*” are associated with men while words like “*soft*”, “*delicate*” or “*nurturing*” are linked to women. Bui observed similar adjectives used to describe and differentiate women’s products from men’s products.³⁹ The following extracts are picked from the sampled cosmetic labels to illustrate the use of adjectives with gendered connotations:

17. “*Rich nourishing body lotion*” [CL 29]
18. “*NIVEA Men Dry Impact*” [CL 28]
19. “*Stay Young Skin Lightening Cream*” [CL 20]
20. “*Ever Sheen Hand and Body Lotion*” [CL 24]
21. “*Power House. Tungsten Strength*” [CL 19]

The adjective “*nourishing*” in extract (17) is gender neutral and does not have inherently gendered connotations. However, when combined with “*body lotion*”, it can be interpreted as being associated with skincare products often marketed toward women. In (18), the use of the adjective “*Men*” explicitly specifies the gender for which the product is intended, carrying a clear gendered connotation. The adjective “*young*” in extract (19) implies a youthful appearance, which is often associated with beauty standards and may indirectly convey gendered connotations related to societal expectations of appearance for women. “*Sheen*” as used in extract (20) suggests a shiny appearance, which might indirectly imply a gendered connotation related to traditional beauty standards for women. In (21), the adjectives “*power house*” and “*Tungsten strength*” imply strength and power, which are traditionally associated with masculinity. It conveys gendered connotations aligned with traditional gender norms for men.

Product Claims for Specific Gender Concerns

Some product descriptions used morphological features to highlight benefits for gender-specific concerns, such as “*targeting blemished skin for men*”, or “*specially designed for women’s skin*”, further reinforcing gendered beauty expectations. Some products were advertised as “*tackling beard growth for men*” or “*reducing fine lines for women*”, implying that these concerns are specific to each gender. This approach perpetuates the idea that certain beauty issues are linked to one gender group. It excludes the other gender group from the claims identified by the product. Such gender is, therefore, excluded from the identified beauty ideal described or claimed by the product. This makes the message conveyed in the product’s label biased as it seems to favour one gender more than the other. It projects one gender group over the other and this is stereotypical. A similar observation was made by Kaur et al. who reported in their study that cosmetic advertisers rely on claim framing to appeal to their customers.⁴⁰ In the present study, however, gender-unfair language was used in framing the products’ claims about their potency and efficacy.

Implications of Gendered Terms and Constructs

The positioning of the brands and the language choice for their marketing predominantly perpetuated gender stereotypes. The language of cosmetic advertisements is generally gender unfair. This heavily affirms assertions held by Winch and Martin, Wollenschlaeger et al. and Eisend that advertisers, especially those in the beauty industry, find it challenging to use gender-fair language in their marketing campaigns.⁴¹

³⁹ Bui, “Gender Language in Modern Advertising: An Investigation.”

⁴⁰ Kaur, Arumugam, and Yunus, “Beauty Product Advertisements: A Critical Discourse Analysis.”

⁴¹ Winch and Martin, “Gender Representation in Advertising: A Longitudinal Analysis of Gender Portrayals in Australian Television Advertisements”; Wollenschlaeger, Unkel, and Weinreich, “Gender-Fair Language and Advertising: An Experiment on Memory and Evaluations of Gendered Language in a Commercial”; Eisend, “A Meta-Analysis of Gender Roles in Advertising.”

Gendered product names perpetuate gender stereotyping in cosmetic advertisements. Some products are explicitly named with gendered terms like “men” or “women”, suggesting that certain cosmetic items are designed exclusively for specific genders. This reinforces the traditional notion that beauty and grooming needs are inherently linked to gender. More so, the use of gendered terms like “men” and “women” in product descriptions and names may inadvertently reinforce the idea that certain skincare or beauty concerns are gender-specific. This perpetuates gendered beauty ideals, suggesting that specific physical attributes are more desirable for women or men.

Furthermore, the use of gendered adjectives and prepositional phrases that further support gender stereotypes in cosmetic advertisements has been revealed. For instance, phrases like “Day by day Men body milk moisturizer without the shine” may subtly imply that men prefer products without a shiny appearance, aligning with the societal notion of masculinity. Additionally, phrases like “insisting on hands, elbows and knees” might indirectly suggest that these areas are men’s skincare routines. By incorporating such linguistic cues, cosmetic advertisements perpetuate the idea that certain beauty practices and preferences are inherently tied to specific genders, further contributing to a narrow understanding of gender roles and expressions.

Morphological and syntactic analysis showed gendered terms and constructs in the names of cosmetic products. These names have been imprinted on the labels of the products and make up the label advertisement of the product. Examples like “Bella Special Body Lotion with Cocoa Butter” and “Gold Skin Body Lotion with Argen Oil” indicate gender associations either through explicit names like “Bella” or by the target market inferred from the names. These gendered labels can lead consumers to internalize certain norms about beauty and self-care, limiting their choices and experiences based on societal expectations. Women might feel confined to products like “Bella” or “Ever Sheen” while men might perceive that products labelled “NIVEA Men” or “Power House” are more suitable for their needs. This segmentation based on gender-unfair language may hinder a more inclusive and diverse beauty culture that embraces individual preferences and identities.

Gender neutral terms also challenge gender stereotypes in cosmetic advertisements. Some cosmetic products are labelled with gender-neutral terms, avoiding explicit gender references. This approach challenges gender stereotypes by promoting inclusivity and suggesting that skincare and beauty products are for all individuals. Furthermore, descriptions such as moisturizing, protecting or nourishing the skin that emphasize functional benefits, rather than associating them solely with a specific gender, challenge the idea that certain products are inherently gendered. While not explicitly mentioned in the data, cosmetic brands can challenge gender stereotypes by using diverse models in their advertisements and showcasing individuals of different gender identities using their products. In most of the products sampled in this study, unfortunately, the brands showcase women using the product. The use of such an image communicates a gender biased message reinforcing gender stereotypes in the brand’s marketing campaign.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of gender-fair language in cosmetic advertisements highlights the need for more gender-fair language in the cosmetic advertisement industry. Embracing inclusive language and representations can challenge gender stereotypes, promote diversity and foster a more inclusive beauty culture. It is suggested that industry-wide guidelines for gender-fair language in cosmetic advertising should be developed. Cosmetic brands should be encouraged to use inclusive language and representations that challenge gender stereotypes and promote diversity. Further studies should also explore how language, imagery and representations shape beauty ideals, societal norms and consumer identities.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that gender-unfair language is prevalent in cosmetic advertisements. Product names, descriptions and claims often use gendered nouns, pronouns and adjectives, reinforcing the idea that certain beauty concerns and products are exclusively tailored to specific genders. The use of gender-unfair language in cosmetic advertisements tends to perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes. Certain products are marketed as “for men” or “for women”, associating specific beauty attributes and concerns with particular genders. This approach can reinforce rigid beauty norms and expectations, limiting the inclusivity and diversity in beauty representations. By focusing on gender-specific concerns, the industry may overlook the diverse needs and preferences of individuals of different gender identities. This exclusionary language may alienate potential customers and fail to cater for a broader audience.

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Appendix: Images of some cosmetic products





Source: Field data (2023)

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