
International Journal of Marketing Semiotics & Discourse Studies

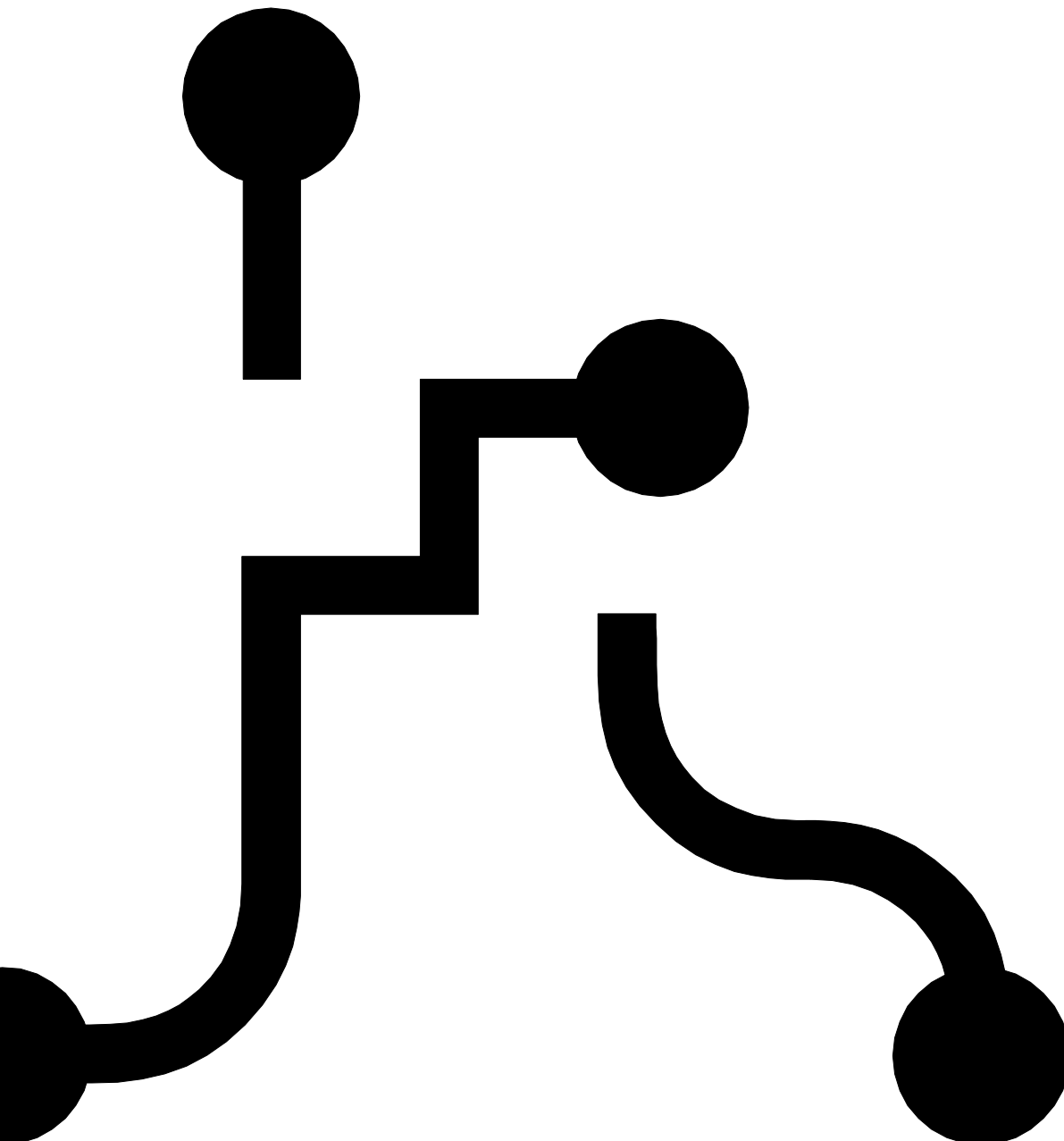
2026

Vol. 14

ISSN: 2195-2280

www.ijmarketingsemiotics.com

Jemimah Ogechi Ekechi (2026). Objectification of femininity in Nigerian media advertising: a critical analysis. *International Journal of Marketing Semiotics & Discourse Studies* Vol. XIV, pp.1-39.



Objectification of femininity in Nigerian media advertising: a critical analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the objectification of women in cosmetic advertisements in Nigerian media, a topic that has received limited scholarly attention despite its profound impact on gender stereotypes and increased body dissatisfaction. The portrayal of women in these advertisements not only reinforces societal perceptions of femininity but also perpetuates the notion of women as sexual objects. This research investigates how advertisers use linguistic choices and visual representations of female models to convey various forms of feminized objectification. Employing a combined framework of multimodal social semiotics and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study explores how body images and textual elements function in a social environment that increasingly prioritizes sexual attractiveness over self-worth and well-being. Data were drawn from 8 purposively sampled cosmetics advertisements that depict women in highly sexualized ways across digital platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, blogs and the print media. The findings indicate that advertisers deliberately employ sexually provocative language and imagery to enhance consumer appeal and drive sales. This research offers critical insights into the evolving societal attitudes and values regarding gender representation and commercialization which has implications on women empowerment.

Keywords: advertisement, gender, media, objectification, semiotics, sexualization.

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0. Introduction

The media serve as one of the most influential forces in shaping societal beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes, exerting both positive and negative effects across all cultures. One of the primary ways in which the media wield significant power in socialization, mass mobilization, and advocacy is through representation (Endong & Obonganwan, 2015). Representation, in this context, refers to "the social process of making sense within all available signifying systems such as image, speech, writing, video, film, and so forth." According to Endong and Obonganwan, representation can be either authoritative or non-authoritative. For instance, the portrayal of femininity or womanhood can occur in official and authoritative discourses, such as legislation and educational frameworks, as well as in non-authoritative forms, including advertising, film, and cinema. The concern here is that visual collage, confronting us daily, is a product of the giant forces of the contemporary world. The power of the images that these processes have produced is inescapable. They are a part of daily interaction, contributing to the way we view and understand our world.

The representation of women in the media has been a focal point of scholarly discourse globally, particularly with the rise of new media. In advertisements for cosmetics and beauty products, women are often subjected to sexual objectification and devaluation while reinforcing idealized beauty standards. Sexual objectification refers to the practice of perceiving or valuing a person primarily in terms of their physical and sexual attractiveness rather than their human endowment with agency and intellect (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Scholars have been criticized the media for presenting women's bodies as objects of sexual desire from an early stage, positioning sexual attractiveness as a central component of femininity and an aspirational goal (McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Nawaz and Zahra (2024) argue that the objectification of women in advertisements undermines their morality and dignity, prioritizing commercial interests over ethical considerations and negatively impacting women's self-esteem. Similarly, Sabao (2013) contends that such representations perpetuate a societal perception of women as mere sexual objects.

Furthermore, Ferrante (1998) asserts that female stereotypes in advertising diminish women's societal value, reducing them to passive objects of desire. The normalization of objectification in commercials has desensitized audiences to violence against women, further exacerbating gender inequalities. According to Grabe et al. (2008), the media's idealization of a light-skinned, thin female body has contributed to body dissatisfaction and insecurity among women, influencing their consumption patterns and eating behaviors. Conley and Ramsey (2011) support this claim, emphasizing that advertisements often reinforce social stereotypes by

depicting women in domestic or maternal roles or adhering to Western beauty ideals, including light skin, long hair, slender figures, excessive makeup, and elongated legs. Such portrayals shape societal values in ways that can be detrimental, particularly in reinforcing outdated gender norms.

Despite the evolving role of women in contemporary Nigerian society, media portrayals have largely failed to reflect progressive attitudes. Rather than highlighting women's contributions and advocating for increased opportunities, Nigerian media have continued to reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate marginalization (Chika, 2012; Okunna, 2012). Consequently, women continue to struggle for agency, recognition, independence, respect, and equality. This study critically examines the sexualized portrayal of women in the media, particularly within beauty and cosmetics advertisements. It seeks to analyze the broader societal implications of such representations, given the significant contributions of women across diverse fields. Recognizing the media's powerful role in shaping public attitudes and perceptions, this research aims to explore the ways in which media portrayals influence gender roles, sexualities, and the discourse surrounding women's empowerment. Additionally, it investigates how the visual and linguistic elements in these advertisements reinforce gendered and sexualized representations of women.

1. Literature review

1.1 Conceptualizing sexual objectification in advertising

Though objectification of women and gender stereotypes in media advertising have been studied for many years, the past few decades have seen a surge in the literature. According to Popova (2010) "advertising gender stereotype has been a much researched and discussed area since 1970 when women's role and positions in society started changing significantly with a great number of women getting college degrees and employment". Huang & Lowry's (2012) study on nudity in Chinese Magazine Advertising showed that female models are more likely to be portrayed at different levels of nudity than male models. In contrast however, Blai, Stephenson, Hill & Green (2006) reported in their findings based on research conducted on ethics in advertising that there is an increased trend in print magazines of men being used more as a sex object rather than women. To these scholars, though these advertisements catch the viewer's attention, this attention is focused on the models in the advertisements and fails to create any brand recognition.

Advertising frequently uses gender roles to promote products and services, therefore exposing people to stereotypical behavior in society (Okpara, 2024). Research on media and

gender has long established that advertising tends to portray women in stereotypical and objectified ways through image representations and language use. Jhally (1990) notes, advertising does not merely reflect social values but actively participates in their construction; it transforms human bodies, emotions, and identities into commodities that circulate in the marketplace. Through this process, women's sexuality becomes a strategic marketing instrument, a symbolic language through which consumer desire is both produced and satisfied. Christelle (2012:26) posits that the language of advertisements is often accompanied by "images which evoke situations and realities in our lives or encourage us to dream about things that we would like to have or do." Goffman (1979) and Kilbourne (1999) show how women's bodies are used as decorative tools in media to sell products; a phenomenon rooted in patriarchal ideologies. This philosophy aligns with the 'mirror' point of view, which asserts that advertising reflects values that exist and are dominant in society. From this sociocultural perspective, objectification also functions ideologically. It perpetuates the notion that femininity is inherently linked to sexual attractiveness and that women's value derives from their capacity to please others. As Bartky (1990) contends, the internalization of objectifying norms constitutes a form of disciplinary power that regulates women's bodies and behaviors. Advertising, therefore, becomes not only a mirror of patriarchal ideology but also a mechanism through which such ideology is reproduced, normalized, and aestheticized. This notion, Zotos & Tsihla (2014) contend, could possibly be interpreted to suggest that in the contemporary socioeconomic and political environment, which influences the value system of a society, multiple factors are interfaced and interrelated. Hence, the way that women and men are presented in advertising would follow the dominant concepts held regarding gender roles in society. In other words, sexual objectification of women and stereotypical gender representation of women in the Nigerian media is a reflection of the sociocultural expectancies that exist in society at large. Mulvey's (1975) theory of the "male gaze" corroborating this view, further explains how women are framed for visual pleasure in ways that prioritize male spectatorship.

In contrast, the 'mold' perspective posits that advertising incorporates stereotypes presented by the media into their own system of values, ideas, and beliefs about the quality of life (Zotos and Tsihla 2014). They create a concept of reality, which tends to match the advertised images. At the end of a long process, individual behavior and human beings' relationships are formulated in such a manner that could be characterized as a 'hybrid.' According to this viewpoint, advertising campaigns create gender identity, based on their images, the stereotyped iconography of masculinity and femininity (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, cited in Grau and Zotos 2016). The reality based on this continuum lies in the social values which are promoted, and the

type of the advertised products. This framework portrays advertising as a system of visual representations which creates meaning within the framework of culture (Zotos and Tsihla 2014). This notion also aligns with Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) *Objectification Theory*. This theory deepens this understanding by linking media portrayals to psychological outcomes. They argue that repeated exposure to objectifying imagery leads to *self-objectification*, a process in which women internalize an observer's perspective on their bodies. This internalization fosters body surveillance, shame, and anxiety, with implications for self-esteem, mental health, and cognitive performance. Empirical research has corroborated these claims: exposure to sexualized advertising has been associated with increased body dissatisfaction (Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008), greater endorsement of sexist beliefs (Loughnan et al., 2010), and reduced perceptions of women's competence (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009). Kilbourne's (1999, 57- 58) idea that 'advertising is our environment. We swim in it as fish swim in the water. We cannot escape it... advertising messages are inside our intimate relationships, our home, our hearts, our heads,' succinctly captures this argument.

1.2 Post-feminist criticisms and the commodification of empowerment

The emergence of post-feminism in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century media discourse has significantly complicated the analysis of sexual objectification. Postfeminist ideology reconfigures traditional feminist debates by presenting sexualized self-representation as a manifestation of personal choice and empowerment rather than as a symptom of oppression. Within this framework, the display of female sexuality is reframed as an expression of agency, autonomy, and confidence. However, this apparent liberation often operates within the boundaries of consumerist and patriarchal logic. Rosalind Gill (2007, 2008) contends that postfeminist media culture is characterized by a "rhetoric of empowered femininity", which simultaneously invokes and disavows objectification. In this paradoxical formulation, women are positioned as active subjects of desire, self-assured, sexually autonomous, and in control of their image, yet their agency remains circumscribed by market imperatives. The body becomes both a site of personal empowerment and a terrain of aesthetic regulation, requiring continuous investment, self-surveillance, and discipline. The concept of empowerment, therefore, becomes entwined with the performance of idealized femininity, producing what Gill describes as the "entanglement of power and pleasure."

This rhetoric transforms consumption into a pathway to liberation: the purchase of beauty products, fashion items, or wellness programs is presented as a means of achieving self-

realization and confidence. As McRobbie (2009) observes, this discourse is deeply ambivalent; it celebrates women's autonomy and choice while subtly reinscribing normative gender roles and beauty hierarchies. Advertising industries capitalize on feminist vocabulary, empowerment, confidence and independence to sell products and lifestyles, a strategy that Goldman, Heath, and Smith (1991) conceptualize as commodity feminism. Through this process, feminist ideals of self-determination are appropriated, aestheticized, and commodified, transforming resistance into marketable style. Consequently, the political edge of feminist critique is neutralized, absorbed into the language of branding and consumer pleasure.

1.3 Global and cross-cultural dimensions of objectification

Although much of the scholarly literature on sexual objectification in advertising originates from Western contexts, recent research underscores its global diffusion and local adaptation. The expansion of transnational media networks and global advertising industries has facilitated the circulation of Westernized beauty ideals across diverse cultural spaces, often displacing indigenous aesthetics and gender identities. Empirical studies indicate that global advertising systems maintain the central logic of sexualization while adapting it to specific cultural and linguistic contexts (Frith, Cheng, & Shaw, 2004; Bode & Choi, 2016).

In African contexts, particularly Nigeria, scholars have documented the media's profound influence on shaping public attitudes and perceptions. Studies by Ikem (1996), Abayomi (2000), and Oyinade et al. (2013) reveal that mass media operate as powerful agents of socialization, molding opinions and values through persistent use of gender stereotypes. Ogunyemi (2015) and Nzegwu (2006) further argue that postcolonial and neo-colonial dynamics continue to shape contemporary ideals of beauty, where colonial legacies valorize Eurocentric features, light skin, slimness, and straight hair as markers of modernity and desirability. Nigerian advertising, particularly in the cosmetics industry, often reinforces these standards by privileging youthful, light-skinned, and slender female bodies as symbols of success, sophistication, and consumer aspiration. While scholars and advocacy groups have critiqued such portrayals for neglecting the evolving roles of women and men in society and for disregarding Afrocentric conceptions of womanhood, these depictions remain pervasive. They perpetuate a symbolic order in which femininity is equated with aesthetic value and erotic appeal.

Beyond Africa, similar patterns are observable in Asian and Latin American media contexts, where advertisements increasingly represent women through Eurocentric ideals of beauty, fair skin, slim figures, and Western fashion aesthetics. These representations reproduce postcolonial

hierarchies of race and gender, linking whiteness and Western modernity to success and desirability. In Nigeria, as Okunna (2002) and Ezeigbo (2012) observe, women are frequently portrayed as emblems of modernity and allure but remain confined to domestic or decorative roles. Thus, the sexualization of women in African advertising must be understood not only as a gendered phenomenon but also as a reflection of globalization, coloniality, and cultural hybridity, where local and global discourses of femininity intersect and negotiate power.

1.4 Emerging trends: from body positivity to digital objectification

Recent years have witnessed attempts by some global brands to challenge narrow ideals of beauty through body positivity and diversity campaigns. Initiatives such as Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign and Nike's introduction of plus-size mannequins have been celebrated for promoting inclusivity and disrupting traditional standards of attractiveness. However, scholars such as Elias, Gill, and Scharff (2017) caution that these initiatives often remain confined within the logics of neoliberal commodification. Even when promoting "natural" or "authentic" beauty, such campaigns still equate empowerment and self-acceptance with consumption, thereby reasserting the centrality of the market in constructing identity. Moreover, the advent of digital and social media has introduced new dynamics of objectification and self-representation. The rise of influencer culture and digital self-branding has blurred the boundary between empowerment and exploitation. While online platforms ostensibly grant women control over their image, they simultaneously reproduce the logic of visibility, desirability, and commodification. As Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, digital economies reward self-sexualization and aesthetic labor, fostering a performative mode of femininity where social value is quantified through engagement metrics, likes, shares, and followers, rather than intrinsic agency or achievement. In this digital context, the female body becomes both producer and product: women engage in affective and aesthetic labor to maintain visibility and relevance within algorithmic cultures that privilege sexualized content. Thus, digital media does not eliminate objectification but rather transform it into a participatory and self-regulating practice aligned with neoliberal values of productivity and self-management.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that sexual objectification in advertising persists, albeit in increasingly complex and self-reflexive forms. Classical feminist critiques (Mulvey, 1975; Goffman, 1979) emphasized women's passivity and bodily fragmentation within visual culture, whereas contemporary analyses (Gill, 2008; Banet-Weiser, 2018) reveal how objectification has evolved into subtler modes embedded in postfeminist and digital discourses. Across both Western

and non-Western contexts, the female body continues to function as an aesthetic and commercial resource. This synthesis underscores the necessity of renewed empirical and theoretical inquiry, particularly in non-Western settings where local cultural norms intersect with global media flows. Understanding how objectification operates within these hybrid contexts requires analytical approaches that account for both the transnational circulation of beauty ideals and the local reinterpretation of femininity. Accordingly, the present study interrogates the discursive and visual mechanisms through which advertising constructs and circulates objectified representations of women, as well as the ways these representations shape perceptions of femininity, agency, and empowerment in a globalized media environment.

2. Methodology

This study employs a multimodal qualitative research design that brings together Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Social Semiotic Analysis within a feminist interpretive paradigm. The rationale for combining these approaches lies in their complementary strengths: CDA, following Fairclough's (1989, 1995) framework, enables the interrogation of advertising discourse as it is embedded in wider socio-cultural and institutional structures, while Social Semiotic Theory, as articulated by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), provides a systematic lens for examining the visual and compositional strategies through which femininity is constructed and objectified. Taken together, these methods allow for a nuanced reading of cosmetics advertising as both text and image, situated within the cultural politics of gender. The study is exploratory and analytical in nature, aiming to reveal patterns of sexual objectification, the discursive construction of femininity, and the interplay between empowerment and commodification in contemporary advertising.

2.1. Data collection

The primary data for this study consists of a corpus of cosmetics advertisements. The advertisements were purposively sampled across print and digital platforms, with selection guided by their explicit or implicit representation of femininity and beauty ideals between 2015 and 2022. This corpus was assembled to capture the multimodal character of contemporary advertising and to provide a basis for systematic analysis of both linguistic and visual elements. A focus group session with women from diverse age groups and socio-economic backgrounds was conducted primarily to complement the findings of the analysis of data from CDA and Social semiotics. The

semi-structured discussion which was audio recorded used selected advertisements as stimuli to elicit interpretive practices, lived experiences, and negotiations of meaning.

2.2. Data analysis

The analysis proceeded in two connected phases. To ensure a systematic examination of the corpus, a content analytic coding procedure was incorporated as an initial stage of analysis. Content analysis enabled the identification, categorization, and comparison of recurring textual and visual features across the advertisements prior to their interpretive examination through Critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Multimodal social semiotics (MSS). CDA, drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, provides a framework for examining texts at three levels: text - the micro-level of linguistic features, the meso-level of discursive practices, and the macro-level of social practices. This enables the researcher to situate advertising discourse within broader ideological structures that perpetuate gender stereotypes and sexual objectification. Multimodal social semiotics, as developed by Kress and van Leeuwen, complements CDA by offering tools to analyze how visual resources such as gaze, proxemics, body positioning, framing, and color symbolism contribute to the construction of meaning.

2.2.1 Theoretical framework

Empirical research on advertising discourse increasingly employs an integrated framework that combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and social semiotics to examine how linguistic and visual resources jointly construct ideological meanings. CDA, most prominently associated with Fairclough (1989, 1995), provides tools for investigating how discourse reproduces power relations and social inequalities. Complementing this, Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory conceptualizes visual communication as a "grammar of design," analogous to linguistic grammar, in which compositional structures and representational choices function as semiotic resources that reflect and reproduce cultural meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001, 2006). The framework identifies three interrelated metafunctions of visual communication: representational, interactive, and compositional.

- Representational metafunction: examines how participants, actions, and settings are depicted, thereby constructing particular versions of social reality and identity.
- Interactive metafunction: considers the relationship between image and viewer, analyzing gaze, angle, distance, and perspective to reveal how audiences are positioned.

- Compositional metafunction: explores how framing, salience, color, and spatial organization establish coherence, hierarchy, and emphasis within the image.

To attain methodological comprehensiveness, this study operationalizes specific visual grammatical categories within the sociosemiotic framework. These categories provide systematic tools for analyzing how advertising constructs femininity, empowerment, and desirability through multimodal strategies:

- Gaze (demand vs. offer): direct engagement versus objectification through averted gaze.
- Camera angle (high, low, eye-level): conveying submission, dominance, or equality.
- Proxemics and framing: shot distance and spatial arrangement signaling intimacy, desirability, or detachment.
- Body positioning and posture: submissive versus assertive stances reinforcing or challenging stereotypes.
- Color palettes and lighting: connoting femininity, sensuality, or empowerment.
- Composition and salience: placement of figures, text, and objects to highlight or marginalize meanings.

By systematically coding these categories across the sample of advertisements, the analysis integrates linguistic and visual strategies into a coherent multimodal framework. This approach disciplines the sociosemiotic methodology, ensuring transparency and replicability, and grounds interpretations of empowerment, objectification, and commodification in observable semiotic resources. The integration of CDA and social semiotics has led to the development of critical multimodal discourse analysis, now widely applied in studies of advertising and media representation (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Advertising provides a particularly fertile ground for multimodal critical analysis because it relies on the interaction of visual imagery and linguistic persuasion to shape consumer perceptions and cultural meanings. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that advertisements do not merely promote products but also construct and normalize gender identities and beauty ideals. For instance, Magalhães (2025) shows how advertising discourse constructs gender identities through the interaction of verbal and visual modes. Her analysis reveals that female models are frequently represented as aestheticized bodies designed to attract consumer attention, thereby reinforcing patriarchal constructions of femininity and aligning female identity with visual desirability.

Feminist discourse scholars have further extended this analytical perspective by examining how advertising appropriates the language of empowerment while simultaneously commodifying women's bodies. Work by Lazar demonstrates that contemporary advertisements often promote

what she terms “power femininity,” where women appear confident and autonomous yet remain defined primarily through beauty, sexuality, and consumption (Lazar, 2006; Lazar, 2009). Similarly, Gill argues that postfeminist advertising increasingly frames women's display of their bodies as a form of personal choice and empowerment, while masking deeper structures of objectification embedded in consumer culture (Gill, 2007).

More recently, Teng (2020) employed Fairclough's three-dimensional model to interrogate a corpus of Chinese cosmetics advertising, demonstrating how linguistic devices such as nominalization, passive constructions, and presupposition operate to naturalize Western beauty ideals and render them ideologically transparent. Teng's analysis illuminated the ways in which the grammatical effacement of agency in advertising slogans, for example, *radiant skin is achieved* rather than *our product achieves radiant skin* functions to obscure the commercial and ideological interests embedded in beauty discourse.

Multimodal analyses further reveal how visual composition contributes to these ideological effects. Scholars applying the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen demonstrate how elements such as gaze direction, camera angle, framing, proxemics and color symbolism structure the relationship between viewers and represented participants, thereby shaping interpretations of gender and desirability. Close-up shots, direct gaze, and stylized bodily presentation, for example, frequently create intimacy with viewers while emphasizing physical attractiveness as a central attribute of femininity (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Ledin and Machin (2019) extend multimodal social semiotics to digital and social media advertising, showing how platform-specific conventions such as mobile portrait orientation, close-up facial imagery, and minimalist digital aesthetics intensify the objectifying visual strategies previously documented in print media. Their analysis underscores the continuing theoretical utility of the Kress and Van Leeuwen framework in accounting for emergent multimodal environments.

Research on fashion and luxury advertising similarly highlights the ideological power of visual representation. Studies by Schroeder (2002) show that advertising images function as cultural texts that construct aspirational identities and lifestyles in consumer culture. In global fashion campaigns, female models are often positioned as passive visual spectacles, with their bodies serving as aesthetic objects designed to stimulate consumer desire (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2005).

Beyond Western contexts, scholars have increasingly applied multimodal CDA to examine advertising practices in non-Western societies. These studies demonstrate how global consumer culture intersects with local cultural identities, particularly in relation to beauty standards and gender representation. In African advertising contexts, for instance, research has highlighted the

persistence of Eurocentric beauty ideals, especially regarding skin tone and bodily aesthetics. Advertisements promoting skin-lightening products frequently reproduce color hierarchies that privilege lighter skin, reflecting broader sociocultural discourses about beauty, modernity, and social mobility.

Overall, empirical scholarship demonstrates that the integration of CDA and social semiotics provides a powerful methodological framework for analyzing advertising discourse. By examining both linguistic and visual dimensions of meaning-making, this approach reveals how advertisements function not only as commercial messages but also as cultural texts that construct gendered identities, normalize beauty hierarchies, and reproduce dominant ideological formations within consumer culture.

2.2.2. Content analytic procedure

Content analysis served as the preliminary analytical stage of the study, facilitating the systematic coding and categorization of the advertising corpus. As a method of interpreting textual data through the identification of themes and patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), it enabled the researcher to uncover recurring representational practices within the dataset. The insights generated from this process provided the foundation for the subsequent application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Social Semiotic (MSS) analysis, through which these patterns were examined in greater interpretive depth.

First, all selected advertisements were reviewed repeatedly to build familiarity with their textual and visual features. Analytical memos recorded recurring patterns, preliminary interpretations, and emerging questions. These memos informed the refinement of the coding framework and later guided the comparison of categories across the corpus. Afterwards, a deductive framework was developed from key CDA and MSS concepts. This addressed textual and visual dimensions of representation in relation to the research questions on sexual objectification, the discursive construction of femininity and gendered identities, and the interplay between empowerment and commodification. Individual categories were grouped into five analytical domains as shown in (Table 1). The domains were informed by the theoretical framework and research questions, checked against the initial memos, and open to refinement through engagement with the data.

Table 1. Analytical domains and coding categories.

Analytical domain	Coding categories	Purpose
Constructions of Femininity and Beauty	Beauty-enhancement claims; references to attractiveness; physical appearance; body representation; youthfulness	Examines how ideals of beauty, femininity, and bodily appearance are constructed and normalized.
Gender Identity and Agency	Empowerment discourse; agency and passivity; depictions of women's roles	Explores how women are positioned as active, passive, infantilized, empowered, or dependent subjects.
Consumer Aspiration and Lifestyle Discourses	Luxury appeals; aspirational messaging; slogans and taglines; evaluative language	Investigates how beauty practices and products are linked to success, status, self-improvement, and desirable lifestyles.
Language and Discursive Strategies	Lexical choices; metaphors; persuasive language; rhetorical devices	Examines the linguistic resources used to construct meaning, persuade audiences, and reinforce particular understandings of beauty and femininity
Multimodal Strategies of Representation and Engagement	Gaze; social distance; camera angle; salience; framing and composition; color symbolism	Analyses how visual resources position viewers, direct attention, create engagement, and shape interpretations of women and beauty ideals.

Each advertisement was assigned an identification code and manually coded using a matrix organized by domain. Textual and visual elements were examined together to capture how language and image combine to construct meaning. Manual coding allowed close engagement with the data and preserved the contextual richness of multimodal features. The coded matrix was then compared across advertisements, within and between domains, to identify which categories recurred, which co-occurred, and which were rare or absent. For example, repeated links between attractiveness, sex appeal, youthfulness, idealized body imagery, and beauty-enhancement claims indicated a broader pattern in the construction of femininity and beauty.

Recurring combinations of empowerment language with images of confidence and direct gaze informed the domain of gender identity and agency. The aim was to identify consistent patterns warranting interpretive examination, not statistical generalization.

Subsequently, recurring and co-occurring codes were consolidated into dominant representational strategies within each domain. These patterns determined what was analyzed in-depth. MSS analysis examined how representational, interactive, and compositional resources operated within and across domains to construct meanings about women and beauty. CDA then explored the ideological implications of these patterns, focusing on how beauty ideals, femininity, consumer identities, and gendered power relations were produced, reinforced, normalized, or contested. Content analysis thus supplied the evidential basis linking data collection to interpretation.

Lastly, to complement the advertisement analysis, a second cycle of inductive coding was conducted manually on the focus group discussion data. It generated six themes: pressure to lighten skin, unrealistic beauty standards, inclusivity and diversity, peer pressure and insecurity, health and safety concerns, and consumer skepticism. These themes were set alongside the analytical domains and integrated with the CDA and MSS findings to assess whether participants' interpretations reinforced, challenged, or complicated the representations in the advertisements.

2.2.3. Focus group (FG)

The study draws on a single focus group discussion (FGD) conducted with ten purposively selected participants representing diverse age groups and socio-cultural backgrounds. The purposive sampling strategy was consistent with the study's commitment to capturing a broad spectrum of interpretive positions and experiential perspectives relevant to the discursive and visual phenomena under analysis. Purposive sampling was considered epistemologically appropriate given that the FGD was not designed to produce representative findings but rather to generate analytically rich, contextually grounded data capable of interrogating the adequacy of interpretations derived from CDA and MSS analyses (Patton, 2002; Morgan, 1997). The session was held in a neutral, easily accessible location selected to reduce institutional power dynamics and promote conditions conducive to open, candid dialogue. The session was audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently manually transcribed. Thus, while the focus group data were analysed **inductively**, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives, the advertisement data were analysed **deductively**, using an established coding scheme informed

by the analytical framework of the study. Participants' anonymity was preserved throughout by assigning numerical identifiers in place of personal information, thereby creating the discursive conditions necessary for truthful engagement with potentially sensitive themes concerning body image, sexuality, and media-constructed femininity.

A semi-structured discussion guide was developed to balance thematic direction with the flexibility necessary for participants' interpretive frameworks and experiential knowledge to emerge organically. The guide comprised the following four thematic clusters directly indexed to the analytical categories generated through CDA and MSS analysis: (1) perceptions of femininity and empowerment as constructed in advertising discourse; (2) interpretations of sexualized portrayals and the visual objectification of women; (3) personal experiences of body image, self-esteem, and social expectations shaped by cumulative media exposure; and (4) affective and critical responses to specific advertisements drawn from the study's corpus.

During the transcription and coding process, a few analytically significant emergent themes were inductively identified beyond those anticipated by the priori framework. These included participant discourses around inclusivity and representational diversity, the role of peer pressure and media-induced insecurity in shaping beauty-related self-perception, critical assessments of digitally manipulated or otherwise unattainable body imagery as artifice, and concerns pertaining to the health and safety implications of advertised cosmetic products. Rather than constituting tangential findings, these inductive codes functioned as productive supplements to the deductive categories derived from CDA and MSS analyses. This enriched the analytical framework by introducing dimensions of meaning particularly those rooted in participants' affective, relational, and embodied engagements with advertising discourse that purely textual and visual analysis could not have generated. The integration of these emergent themes into the broader synthesis strengthened both the comprehensiveness and the interpretive accountability of the study's findings.

Participants in the FGD provided informed consent as they understood the purpose and voluntary nature of the study. All data are anonymized to protect participant's confidentiality. The study adhered to ethical research standards, including objectivity and transparency in data interpretation.

2.3. Data synthesis

The synthesis of findings in this study draws together insights from content analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Semiotic Analysis to interrogate the objectification of femininity in cosmetics advertising. While CDA revealed how advertising slogans and lexical choices embed femininity within broader socio-cultural structures, Social Semiotic Analysis exposed visual strategies such as gaze, modality, framing, and salience through which femininity is constructed and objectified. The synthesis of findings from textual and visual analyses was strengthened through the FGD, whereby the textual and visual analyses were examined against focus group discussion.

Within the visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, several analytical categories were selected based on their direct relevance to advertising's gendered semiotics of advertising discourse. For instance, the analytical category of Gaze discussed in Chapter 4, "*Representation and Interaction*" (pp. 114–150), was prioritized for its relevance to feminist critiques of visual culture as it encodes asymmetrical power relations between represented participants and viewers. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006, p. 124) contend, the act of looking is far from neutral, functioning instead to establish differential relations of power, intimacy, and social distance. This theoretical insight is particularly consequential for situating gaze within a feminist analytical framework: cosmetics advertising consistently positions women as passive subjects of an objectifying gaze, thereby reproducing and legitimizing unequal gendered power relations.

The related dimension of *proxemics and social distance* was similarly foregrounded as an analytical lens. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the selection of representational distance is never ideologically neutral; rather, it encodes the relational dynamics between represented participants and viewers whether intimate, personal, social, or impersonal (p. 124). Close-up framings conventionally connote intimacy and affective involvement, whereas long shots signal detachment and social objectivity (p. 125). These choices carry significant implications for how femininity is relationally and ideologically positioned within advertising imagery.

To Kress and van Leeuwen, "*The act of looking is not neutral. It establishes relations of power, of intimacy, of social distance*" (p. 124). This insight is crucial for situating gaze within a feminist critique. Cosmetics advertising often constructs women as passive subjects of the gaze, reinforcing objectification and unequal power relations. Proxemics/Social Distance are equally relevant, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), "The choice of distance is never neutral.

It encodes the kind of relation between represented participants and viewers: intimate, personal, social, or public” (p. 124). “Close shots suggest intimacy and involvement; long shots suggest detachment and objectivity” (p. 125).

Modality, elaborated across pages (151–180), was selected to interrogate the degrees of realism encoded in cosmetic advertising imagery. Contemporary cosmetics campaigns routinely manipulate modality through the calibration of color saturation, brightness, and detail to naturalize dominant beauty ideals and present them as authentic, rendering them aesthetically authentic and culturally normative. This makes modality a critical analytical category for understanding how advertising legitimizes and universalizes constructions of femininity. Framing and Composition, theorized across pages (181–226), were further deployed to analyze the spatial organization of visual elements in the service of gendered meaning-making. For instance, compositional structures such as salience and framing reveal the visual logic through which femininity is hierarchically organized and ideologically privileged within the image. Salience, specifically discussed across pages (200–210), was used to identify the aspects of femininity such as lips, eyes, or skin that are visually foregrounded, and to examine how these emphases contribute to the objectification and fragmentation of women’s bodies. Salience is particularly relevant in advertising, where visual prominence directly shapes consumer attention, identification, and desire.

These categories were chosen among others in Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar precisely because they most directly illuminate the mechanisms through which femininity is constructed, emphasized, and objectified in multimodal texts. By synthesizing CDA’s attentiveness to textual discourse and ideological formation with these semiotic categories, the analysis foregrounds the convergent multimodal strategies through which cosmetics advertising both reflects and actively shapes dominant cultural understandings of femininity.

3. Data presentation and analysis

Advertising has become one of the most vital aspects of marketing strategies in the modern consumer world. Organizations have started to depend heavily on advertising to grab consumer attention towards products, services, information or experiences offered to a market to satisfy consumer needs or wants. Unfortunately, as the ad world is growing and is gaining more independence, the objectification of women has also grown and is used as a tool to attract more profits (Nawaz & Zahra, 2024). Feminists have long objected to ads that portray women as sexual

objects, a situation that neither the impact of feminism nor a climate of 'political correctness' has affected significantly. Images of women's sexuality and physical attributes are used to sell countless numbers of products, very often when the appearance of women's bodies is both irrelevant and unnecessary. They have argued for a long time that images of women's bodies, which are presumed to be playful and harmless, may help solidify the objectification of women, and in some cases contribute to a wider climate of violence against women (Litosseliti, 2013). The underlying messages emphasize sexuality, often presenting women as sex objects. Some of the cosmetics advertisements are sexualized and denigrating to women and the feminine even though our first impression of them creates a sense of effectiveness.

The following section presents a critical analysis of selected cosmetics and beauty advertisements, employing Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Kress and van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic Theory as complementary frameworks. The purpose is to examine how linguistic and visual strategies jointly construct femininity, sexual desirability, and empowerment.

According to MacKay and Covell, (1997), even though exposure to sexually objectifying advertisements is shown to produce anti-women attitudes, the sexual victimization of women is glamorized in advertisements (Kilbourne, 1999) and is suggested to provide a backlash against women's increasing power in society (Stankiewicz and Rosselli, 2008). It is interesting to observe that modern media seem to portray female bodies using "retro-sexist" imagery of women in advertising (Plakoyiannaki and Zotos, 2009). Retro-sexism is defined as a social and stylistic phenomenon, based on the communication of culturally sanctioned aspects of femininity related to notions of dependency, attractiveness, and adherence to household tasks (Williamson, 2003). Whereas some researchers suggest that retro-sexism in advertising appears to empower women, others contend this phenomenon can be seen as a backlash against feminism (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006). The main difference between retro-sexism and earlier female sexualized images lies in the assimilation of feminist criticism against sexist advertising, so as to produce "commercial femininities" in the service of commodity consumption (Lazar, 2006, p. 505).

Figure 1



From a visual semiotic perspective, the advertisement in Figure 1 (see Appendix 2 for details about all Figures) constructs the female model as sexually attractive and elegantly posed, yet simultaneously passive and emotionally vacant. Although only her upper body is shown, the framing and posture evoke sensuality and seduction. This contrast is particularly revealing because the product being promoted, Black Opal facial powder, does not necessitate bodily exposure. By foregrounding the model's nude upper body over the cosmetic itself, the advertisement visually prioritizes her sexuality, making her appear to be the object on display rather than the product. Such representation reinforces the long-standing discourse of women as aestheticized commodities used to enhance a product's allure. Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2001) social semiotic theory illuminates how this effect is achieved through multimodal resources. The *interactive metafunction* is evident in the model's downward, averted gaze, which avoids engagement and positions her as passive, distant, and submissive. The *camera angle*, slightly high and frontal, places the viewer in a more dominant position, reinforcing her portrayed fragility and vulnerability. The *color palette*, soft, muted, and delicately illuminated, further enhances the connotation of delicacy and emotional withdrawal. The *compositional arrangement* centers the woman's body, not the product, signaling that femininity and sexual appeal function as the persuasive mode of address. Such multimodal cues collectively construct a subject who is visually present but psychologically absent.

Situating this reading within Fairclough's (1992, 1995) Critical Discourse Analysis, the advertisement can be understood as a discursive event that simultaneously *represents*, *enacts*, and *reproduces* gendered power relations. At the level of representation, the model embodies

stereotypical femininity, silent, compliant, and objectified. Through its production and consumption practices, the advertisement circulates and normalizes patriarchal ideologies that position women as objects of visual pleasure and commercial utility. Fairclough's *social practice* dimension clarifies that such portrayals draw on broader cultural discourses that naturalize female weakness, eroticization, and subordination. This interpretation aligns with Goffman's (1979) argument that advertising often depicts women as powerless, inert, and fragile, and with Furnham and Mak's (1999) claim, cited in Sharma and Bumb (2021), that representations of women as passive and emotionally detached connote psychological instability. Ultimately, both the semiotic and discursive analyses demonstrate how the advertisement appropriates the imagery of feminine vulnerability while re-inscribing deeper patriarchal scripts of dominance, objectification, and control.

Figure 2



The advertisement in Figure 2 shows a popular Nigerian celebrity gazing directly and seductively at the viewer thereby creating maximum appeal and involvement. The iconic image is very close, short showing only the face. The slogan 'say amore with your eyes' placed at the top right side represents the given element which indicates the popularity and celebrity status of the model. The slogan is also a purely sexist statement and not healthy for the realization of a gender-neutral environment. Moreover, those words are very cleverly chosen as they contain subliminal message that a woman can be in control of the man she wants to seduce or sexually attract. Yet, this

empowerment narrative is commodified: empowerment is achieved through the purchase and display of beauty products. On the left side is the new element which is what an individual will look like for using the product. The slogan is uniquely written with both small and capital cases as well as three colors – red, ash and white to depict its salience. ‘Amore’ written in two cases and colors – red and white is an Italian word which means love. These two-color schemes are somehow juxtaposed, red signifies danger, love and romance and white purity/brightness, to make a statement about the hotness of the product and at the same time its alluring quality. The impression created by the gaze – fully primed eyes, is of sexual provocation to the viewer. The eye is also a very important part of the body meant for interpersonal connection. Revealing that images can reinforce stereotyped forms of femininity (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001). Often the women who are successful in the advertisements are shown as sexually attractive, concluding that there is a need to be sexually attractive to be successful (Sharma and Bumb, 2021).

Figure 3



The ad shown in the appendix as Figure 3 is for foundation, loose and compact powder. The model in this advertisement simply revealed her feminine touch depicted through her pose and the way she touched and caressed her neck and part of her face, which according to Gofman (1979) depicts women as delicate and fragile. Judging by her facial expression and gesture, the model looks passive and rather than demand something from the viewers, she is portrayed in the form of an offer. That is, she is visually represented as more sexually passive and available (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). The color chocolate is also made salient in this advertisement showing the beauty of the African woman. However, the bodily display, for instance, bare part of the shoulder, with some parts of the body highlighted such as shoulders, makeup and so on, portrays the model as a sexual object sexualized for the pleasure of men and the viewers (Rodrigues,

2016). The adjectives like “flawless” and “Fresh” impose moral and aesthetic hierarchies that equate beauty with virtue. Fairclough’s (1995) ideological framing is evident: beauty is constructed as both natural and desirable, concealing the commercial interest underpinning this idealization. The triadic structure, “flawless, Fresh and Comfortable,” creates rhythmic cohesion, producing affective intensity and memorability. However, the linguistic coupling of authenticity with perfection exposes an internal contradiction: the “feminism” is defined by conformity to commercial beauty standards.

Figure 4



This analysis refers to the advertisement in Figure 4 which features a young woman with parted lips and applying a red lip stick. This image is highly sexualized, especially when looking at the posture of the model holding lipstick to her mouth. At the level, the tagline “Keep it Juicy” establishes a relational dynamic where femininity is defined through sensuality. The imperative of “Juicy” operates as a prescriptive discourse, positioning beauty as a performance oriented towards the male gaze. This reflects Fairclough’s (1995) notion of synthetic personalization, where advertisements simulate intimacy with the consumer while reinforcing collective gender ideologies. Advertisements are not only sexualized through imaging but text as well. It is quite an unsettling advertisement with the text itself pointing towards sexual content and context. The posture of the woman with parted lips and gesture is sexualized and is directed towards provoking sexual emotions. The composition of color draws the attention of the smoky gaze of the individual and brings out the predominant shade in the image - which is red. The combination of red, white and pink and shades of powder could be interpreted as potential sexual drama and wild aspect

of the model. The image combined with the caption 'keep it juicy' highly sexualizes the model, making it look like the advertisement is selling the woman rather than the lipstick.

Figure 5



The infantilization of women in cosmetics and beauty advertising, exemplified in Figure 5, continues to function as a dominant discursive strategy that reinforces patriarchal gender ideologies. By depicting women as childlike, vulnerable, dependent, and intellectually inferior, such advertisements reproduce stereotypical constructions of femininity that privilege male authority and dominance. Consequently, these portrayals marginalize women's agency, sustain unequal power relations, and legitimize expectations of female submissiveness within broader social and cultural contexts.

In the visual example referenced, this infantilization is achieved through a combination of aesthetic choices, particularly pastel color palettes, exaggerated bodily postures reminiscent of clowning, and even baldness, each contributing to a symbolic regression to childlikeness. Goffman (1997) contends that the costume-like stylization of women's fashion in advertisements undermines their perceived seriousness, making them appear less authentically present in social contexts when compared to men. The image in question exemplifies this: the model's pose, visual styling, and overall demeanor collectively diminish her perceived agency. The whimsical or juvenile aesthetic signals a willingness to participate socially without conveying any lasting identity or commitment to the persona depicted. Ultimately, such portrayals reduce women to visual

commodities, molded and manipulated to satisfy the desires of advertisers and appeal to a consumer gaze that privileges fantasy.

Figure 6



The advertisement represented in Figure 6 creates the impression that women should behave in a sexualized feminine way to be noticed and appreciated (Redmond, 2003). The gaze of the model and her position on the bed with the lotion in her hand open a potential path through which subsequent components of the advertisement have been constructed. It is through such constructions and components that we are guided towards a sexualized imaging of the woman. The exposed body through which such reflections have been completed provides the most effective approach and determinism of effectiveness. The advertisement depicts women only as objects of desire, weak, primarily as objects of male sexual desire, rather than as independent whole people. The ad portrays women as often used in products to induce a sexual appeal (Kilbourne, 1999). According to (Browne, 1998; Goffman, 1979), women are often portrayed as lying down on the ground or on a bed, a way of portraying them as passive as well indicating a conventionalized expression of availability.

Figure 7



This analysis refers to the advertisement exemplified in Figure 7 showing before and after the use of the beauty product and the caption 'lighten up' is a typical example of how advertisement discourse normalizes the objectification of women, marginalizes diverse representations, and reinforces light skin as beauty ideals. The tagline of this ad subtly promotes the ideology of lighter skin being more fashionable, attractive and superior to darker skin tones. While this advertisement does not depict explicit sexual appeal, its message could potentially influence women especially young girls to obsess on their body image leading to self-objectification.

Figure 8



The advertisement presented in Figure 8 presents a striking visual composition in which the ivory model appears harmoniously integrated into a backdrop dominated by meticulously arranged, petal-like floral motifs. At first glance, the aesthetic appeal is pronounced, evoking softness, elegance, and romanticism. However, the model's bodily posture invites closer scrutiny: it assumes a position suggestive of sexual openness, thereby foregrounding a discourse of eroticized femininity. Despite the floral embellishments that ostensibly denote innocence or natural beauty, the model's pose and gestural cues appear carefully orchestrated to evoke sensuality and sexual provocation.

The advertisement's textual component reinforces this visual narrative by employing accessible, unambiguous language that aligns with the overt communicative strategy. Yet, this alignment underscores a more concerning trend within visual marketing, the reliance on the "pretty model" trope. Through the deployment of a conventionally attractive, sexually suggestive female figure, the advertisement functions as a mechanism of visual seduction, intended to command the viewer's gaze and, by extension, cultivate interest in the product. Such representations are not neutral. The deliberate manipulation of feminine beauty and the replication of narrow aesthetic ideals engage in the commodification of womanhood. This commercial strategy, underpinned by gendered norms and aesthetic stereotyping, reflects a broader cultural tendency toward the objectification and eroticization of the female form in consumer spaces. Ultimately, the ad exemplifies how visual media frequently capitalizes on

idealized femininity, contributing to a discourse that is not only gender-insensitive but also complicit in perpetuating sexualized visual economies.

4. Results and discussion

This research highlights the prevalence of highly sexualized advertisements in the cosmetics industry, where the female body is often used to attract consumers. Such portrayals have significant implications for women's empowerment, which entails the ability to act freely based on personal aspirations rather than imposed norms. As societal progress demands change, media should focus on celebrating women's achievements rather than reinforcing negative stereotypes. The Platform for Action (Beijing, 1996) advocates eliminating degrading images of women in media to provide a balanced representation of their diverse contributions (Oyinade, Daramola, & Lamidi, 2013). Research suggests that media content remains stereotypical, depicting women as passive and dependent, while men are portrayed as dominant and independent.

Unrealistic portrayals of women contribute to low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and restricted self-development (Eisend, 2010; Goffman, 1979). Feminist discourse continues to grapple with the commodification of women's bodies in a neoliberal and patriarchal marketplace (Matich et al., 2019). Advertisements persistently depict women as subordinate, despite progress in reducing gender stereotypes (Grau & Zotos, 2016; Sylvendahl, 2017). An emerging countertrend is "femvertising," which presents women in empowered roles (Peres et al., 2017; Varghese & Kumar, 2020, cited in Sharma & Bumb, 2021). This approach aligns with contemporary gender equality movements and advancements in women's rights (Akestam et al., 2017).

4.1 Findings from Content analysis and focus group discussion

Advertisements utilize linguistic and visual strategies to persuade consumers, frequently reducing women to objects of desire while simultaneously invoking discourses of empowerment. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and social semiotics, this study demonstrates how advertising language and imagery produce meanings around feminism, desirability, and agency. Feminist critiques have long challenged such representations, arguing that media privilege sexual appeal over intellectual or artistic value and thereby sustain systems of objectification. Without a broader shift in societal perceptions of women, advertising discourse risks continuing to reproduce these problematic ideologies. Consequently, sustained, critical engagement by media scholars and social activists remains essential for interrogating and transforming such portrayals.

The analysis of eight cosmetics advertisements revealed recurring discursive and visual patterns that objectify femininity. Linguistically, advertisers deploy sexually suggestive metaphors

alongside passive descriptors, while simultaneously appropriating feminist linguistic ideologies of modernity, boldness, independence, and liberation. However, this “empowerment” is consistently framed as attainable through consumption. Meaning making thus emerges through lexical choices, metaphors, and framing devices that either reproduce or subtly challenge dominant ideologies. For instance, empowerment was framed through imperatives such as “protect your natural beauty,” “flawless,” and “fresh,” yet remain inextricably tied to consumption and commodification. Similarly, phrases like “say amour with your eyes” and “keep it juicy” construct femininity through sensuality and desirability, reinforcing the notion that women’s value lies in their appearance.

Visually, these advertisements reinforce such meanings through semiotic resources including gaze direction, body positioning, and color palettes, which privilege slimness, youthfulness, light skin, and exaggerated femininity thereby reinforcing Eurocentric beauty hierarchies. Across both strands of analysis, the paradox of empowerment emerged as a defining theme. Advertising slogans ostensibly promote autonomy, yet empowerment was invariably tied to consumption. Thus, while advertisements linguistically celebrate empowerment, they visually perpetuate objectification and commodification of femininity. As one participant observed, *“It looks as if they sell empowerment as a product, but it’s really just another way of telling us we’re not adequate without makeup.”* This critique reflects Gill’s (2007) argument that postfeminist advertising legitimizes consumer culture while reinforcing patriarchal constructions of femininity.

4.2 Points of convergence and divergence amongst analytical strands

CDA, Multimodal social semiotics analysis and focus group converged on several key findings. They confirmed that cosmetics advertising objectifies femininity, commodifies empowerment, and reinforces Western beauty ideals. The contradiction between empowerment and objectification emerged as a central theme across the methods. This convergence strengthens the validity of the study, by showing that discursive and semiotic patterns identified in textual analysis are mirrored in women’s lived experiences. However, the methods diverged in interpretive depth. While CDA analysis revealed discursive and semiotic strategies, focus group illuminated the emotional and social consequences of these portrayals. Participants articulated how advertising shapes self-esteem, workplace norms, and peer expectations, thereby extending the analysis beyond textual critique to lived realities. Importantly, focus group introduced agency and resistance: participants voiced desires for change, calling for greater diversity in representation and portrayals of women in active, empowered roles beyond appearance. Cultural specificity further complicates these findings. Although CDA and MSS analysis highlights the dominance of

Western ideals, focus group data reveal how Nigerian advertisements adapt these standards locally, often reproducing Eurocentric aesthetics while negotiating cultural identity. This underscores the tension between global consumer culture and localized representation.

4.3 Lived interpretations and psychological consequences

Focus group discussion provided a human-centered perspective, revealing how women interpret and respond to these portrayals. Participants consistently described the advertisements as hyper-feminized and unrealistic, producing pressure to conform to unattainable standards. Whereas younger women (18–25) mostly viewed these portrayals as aspirational yet unattainable, older participants critiqued them as perpetuating outdated stereotypes. Across age groups, empowerment narratives were dismissed as hollow, tied to consumption rather than genuine agency. Psychological consequences were strongly articulated: feelings of inadequacy, self-objectification, harmful practices such as skipping meals to emulate models, lowered self-esteem, workplace and peer pressures were linked to repeated exposure. These findings resonate with Magalhães' (2005) observation that advertising constructs femininity through aestheticized bodies, aligning female identity with visual desirability.

Cultural nuances added another dimension. While global campaigns promote Western beauty ideals, local adaptations incorporate cultural symbols only superficially. Even when African or Asian models are featured, their images are often altered to fit Western norms. Thus, the focus group reflections underscore the marginalization of authentic cultural representation, revealing how global consumer culture shapes local advertising practices in ways that perpetuate inequality. Importantly, participants articulated resistance, calling for greater diversity in body types, skin tones, and age representation. They envisioned advertising that portrays women in active, empowered roles, leaders, thinkers and creators rather than simply as faces with perfect makeup. This call for authenticity and inclusivity highlights a growing rejection of narrow beauty ideals and a push toward more socially responsible advertising. These findings extend the scope of multimodal CDA by demonstrating that advertising discourse not only constructs gendered identities but also influences everyday practices and institutional norms.

4.4 Implications for further research

This study carries important implications for marketing, discourse analytic and semiotic theory as well as practice. By demonstrating that advertising meaning is produced through the interplay of linguistic strategies such as lexical choices, metaphors, and framing devices and semiotic resources including gaze, body positioning, and color palettes, it advances our theoretical understanding of how commercial texts function as cultural artefacts that normalize identity categories and reinforce hegemonic beauty standards. For marketing practice, the findings

highlight the risks inherent in empowerment narratives that are rhetorically celebrated yet visually undermined, urging practitioners to design campaigns that genuinely promote diversity, agency, and authenticity rather than commodified empowerment.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that advertisements continue to perpetuate the objectification of women through visual and discursive strategies that position them as passive, sexualized, and ornamental. By consistently portraying women in subordinate postures, seated on the ground or bed, legs bent or open, emotionally detached, and framed as sensual objects, advertisers reinforce restrictive stereotypes of femininity. These depictions dictate beauty standards and self-care expectations that undermine women's empowerment, commodifying the female body as a tool of attraction rather than recognizing women as autonomous individuals with agency and intellect.

The prevalence of youthful, slim, light-skinned women with digitally perfected appearances highlights how advertising privileges aesthetic appeal over product utility, shaping societal perceptions and fostering unrealistic ideals. Such portrayals exert pressure on women to conform to artificial standards of beauty, often resulting in self-objectification, body shaming, and diminished self-esteem across diverse age-groups and ethnic backgrounds. Subsequently, these representations attest to how advertising practices contribute to broader cultural narratives that normalize inequality.

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Appendix A

Focus group: profile, and objectives

Objectives of FGD

- To explore how women interpret portrayals of femininity in beauty/cosmetics ads.
- To assess perceived links between media representations and empowerment.
- To understand psychological/social impacts of idealized beauty standards.
- To evaluate whether advertising reinforces or challenges gender stereotypes.

Table 2: Participants' profile

Group	Total number of participants	Age range	Background
1	10	18 - 45	4 students 2 professionals 2 housewives 2 businesswomen

Discussion guide (FGD)

1. Opening

- Warm-up: Participants share favorite beauty/cosmetics ads.
- Icebreaker: First impressions of women's portrayal in media.

2. Core Questions

- How do you interpret portrayals of women in beauty/cosmetics ads?
- Do these portrayals influence your perception of femininity or empowerment?
- What psychological or social effects do idealized beauty standards have on you or people you know?
- Do you feel these ads reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes?
- How do cultural and socioeconomic contexts shape your interpretation of these ads?

3. Closing

- Reflection: What changes would you like to see in beauty advertising?
- Final thoughts: How should media better represent women?

Appendix B

Figure 1



Black Opal Nigerian Cosmetics – Face powders

www.bellanaija.com September 15, 2016

Figure 2



Zaron Cosmetics - Zaron Eye Primer

Source: www.bellanaija.com November 26, 2015

Figure 3



Oriflame Cosmetics – Velvety Matte foundation

Source: Nairaland, October 4, 2018

Figure 4



Essenza National Lipstick Day Campaign ad: Face makeup & Swatches – July 28. 2022

Source: Facebook.com

Figure 5



Zaron Cosmetics – HD/Axe Liquid Eyeliner

Source: <https://www.zaroncosmetics.com/product/axe-liquid-eyeliner>

Figure 6



Nivea Radiant & Beauty Even Glow

Source: <https://www.nivea.com.ng/highlights/new-nivea-radiant-beauty-range>

Figure 7



Lighten Up Plus Exfoliating Soap

Source:

https://www.instagram.com/lamifragrance/?igsh=OG1ucGh5d3J6NWM5&utm_source=qr

Figure 8



Ivory Passion, Beauty and Complexion Soap: November 1, 2023.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CzG2DI2MLdC/>