



Semiotic Analysis of Women's Representation in Advertisement with the Approach of Julia Kristeva's Theories

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction

Human civilization is male-oriented, based on physiological distinctions between men and women that have led to gender differences. The existence of such a civilization has resulted in women evaluating themselves according to masculine standards and adhering to patriarchal thought. The question of how, despite the advancement of civilization, patriarchal beliefs continue to infiltrate women's identities today.

Following the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism, supply began to exceed demand, leading to various responses for every need. Advertising emerged as a strategy to increase sales in this competitive environment. Yet, advertisements, which are composed of signs, possess intricate strata of significance and can be employed to advance ideology within societies, as truth is established through the use of signs. In this research, a semiotic analysis was conducted to understand the significance and impact of advertisements in perpetuating gender-biased perspectives. The primary theorist for this study was Julia Kristeva, a critical thinker in both semiotics and women's studies.

Kristeva's semiotic reflections incorporate Saussurean linguistics and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, resulting in a novel semiotic approach known as "semanalysis." Kristeva, a postmodern feminist, advocates for the fundamental liberation from oppressive thought. She perceives language in subjectivity as the intertwined dimensions of the Symbolic (the logical, paternal aspect of language) and the Semiotic (the emotional, corporeal, pre-linguistic aspect influenced by mother-child interaction). Upon entering the Symbolic stage, a child acquires societal norms and predefined gender roles that are influenced by cultural discourses, rather than biological or psychological realities.

Kristeva posits that it is imperative to reevaluate language that has been influenced by a patriarchal system, and that women should embrace their identity in a fluid, evolving process rather than limiting themselves. Her philosophy does not deny the distinctions between males and women; rather, it endeavors to comprehend them within the confines of language, culture, and psychoanalysis. The objective of this research is to analyze the representation of women in Iranian detergent advertisements through Kristeva's theories. Specifically, it will investigate the roots of beliefs that restrict women to the domestic sphere and the manner in which advertisements disseminate patriarchal beliefs throughout society.

Methodology

This fundamental investigation employs a feminist and poststructuralist approach, incorporating Julia Kristeva's theories. Library-based data collection was employed to conduct a semiotic content analysis. In this framework, texts are perceived as containing concealed strata of meaning with active mechanisms, necessitating analysis to understand the full implications. This study focused on representations of women in detergent commercials that were broadcast on Iranian television from 2011 to 2021, as documented in the Media Archive's advertising database. A comprehensive analysis was conducted, and notes were taken regarding the portrayal of women. 203 of the 408 advertisements examined exhibited a stereotypical portrayal of women that was restricted to domestic and kitchen roles. The research also retrospectively examines the effects and consequences of advertisements containing symbolic signs, analyzing their impact on women's identities today. In this context, meaning is not perceived as a static system of signs, but rather as a dynamic process of meaning formation that encompasses biological and unconscious components.

Results

The detergent commercials from 2011 to 2021 were the subject of this investigation. 203 of the 408 advertisements utilized gendered semiotic codes to depict women as content and confined to the home, where they performed household tasks or cared for children, while their spouses were either working outside or relaxing at home.

Such texts impose limited roles on women in society and family, hindering the formation of an independent identity. These individuals frequently suppress their self-expression, as they are conditioned to believe that they are incapable of any other form. Unprejudiced self-discovery is impossible when one is perpetually attempting to achieve ideals. Advertising representations subtly influence a woman's identity and self-perception, shaping her through a patriarchal lens. It is crucial to note that this analysis is not author-centric; creators may be influenced by societal norms or client demands. These representations subtly validate patriarchal ideas, affecting women's identities and should not be overlooked.

Conclusion

This research is founded on Julia Kristeva's theories on post-structuralist semiotics and women's studies. She emphasizes the importance of questioning structures and the notion of fixed meanings within texts. She posits that a text is a complex amalgamation of meanings, rendering it impossible to arrive at a single, definitive interpretation. Thus, for the advertisements studied here, the purpose cannot be limited to mere product promotion; any text that signifies also participates in reshaping reality.

Kristeva views femininity as a source of power, rather than something to suppress. She acknowledges differences between men and women, underscoring their equal worth, the fluidity of identity, and the influence of language on the development of dynamic identities. She also contends that motherhood should not be restricted to a single gender. Kristeva regards feminism as a movement that aims to reassess identity and transform cultural and linguistic structures. She is committed to the development of new representations of femininity that transcend current limitations.

Regardless of the authors' intentions, this study, which concentrates on the effect and audience, utilizes semiotic analysis. Although advertisements seem to be primarily intended to promote consumption, the representation of women in them is influenced by traditional patriarchal beliefs, which hinder women from expressing their individuality. Consequently, while women today have a greater degree of autonomy than they did in the past, this content causes them to restrict themselves, thereby reinforcing societal norms that associate femininity with motherhood, marriage, domestic chores, and appearance. An ideal woman is depicted as one who attends to all these roles under any circumstances. Even women who work outside the home are expected to be nurturing, presentable, and skilled in domestic tasks.

Sex is biologically defined, yet gender is a cultural construct. Women do not experience femininity through truth; rather, they do so through symbols, which causes them to suppress or disregard certain aspects of themselves. However, they should be able to adopt any role without restriction. Today, patriarchy infiltrates media, creating the illusion of choice for women while directing them toward certain roles that are subsequently undervalued. While homemaking and caregiving are valuable, they are not inherently gendered, and femininity should not be associated with specific roles or positions. Patriarchy continues to exist in a variety of structures, such as the media, despite the extensive efforts directed at it. Thus, merely modifying a single text or patriarchal structure is insufficient; a broader perspective that goes beyond current structures is needed, aiming to disrupt and reimagine them entirely.

Conflict of Interest

The authors affirm that this research is not influenced by any financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest.

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