



RESEARCH PAPER

Reconstructing Identity through Language and Image: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Beauty Brands in Pakistan on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The study explores luxury and affordable beauty brands construction of identities through lexical and visual strategies in Instagram advertisements within Pakistani context. The study is grounded in Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) and Social Semiotic Theory and explores language and visual elements working together to form brand identities and position the target audience. The data consists of advertisements from luxury brands such as Dior, Chanel, Guerlain, Prada and YSL. The affordable brands included are Maybelline, NYX, e.l.f., Sheglam and Essence. Using purposive sampling both captions and the static images are analyzed to identify patterns in lexical choices, visual composition, and brand narratives. The findings of the study state that luxury advertisements use formal, technical language and incorporate minimalist visuals to construct a narrative of exclusivity, prestige and refinement. In comparison, affordable advertisements use interactive language with dynamic and vibrant visuals creating a sense of reliability, accessibility and everyday use for its consumers. The study concluded that beauty advertisements not only carry out product promotions, but they also operate as a multimodal system reflecting consumer identities and social meanings. The research contributes to the field of Discourse Analysis by foregrounding the impact of language and visuals in shaping brand communication in social media and digital domain.

KEYWORDS Multimodal Analysis, Social Semiotics, Luxury, Affordable, Exclusivity, Accessibility, Beauty Brands, Critical Analysis, Ideology, Narrative

Introduction

In digital discourse, communication meaning making has become multimodal where text alone is not the only carrier of meaning instead images, colors, layouts, and other visual resources work together. Multimodal Critical Discourse (MCDA) rooted in Social Semiotics, provides a framework for examining different semiotic modes and their interactions to produce meaning in communication (Halliday, 1978a)(Kress and Leeuwen, 1996). One major domain of Multimodal communication is in advertising, specifically the beauty industry. The beauty advertisements along with texts incorporate visuals, symbols and culturally meaningful representations to influence consumer perceptions creating ideals of beauty. Studies reveal that media and advertising promote specific beauty standards and shape consumer perceptions through both textual and visuals (Asghar, 2021). Although previous research has focused on advertising discourse and multimodal communication, most studies focused on either individual brands or isolated aspects as

language, visuals or audience responses. There remains a comparative research gap that examines luxury and affordable beauty brands construction of distinct narratives through the integrated use of textual and visuals particularly in the Pakistani digital sphere. The current study is guided by two research questions: what textual and visual strategies are used by luxury and affordable beauty brands in social media advertisements, and how do these strategies construct different brand narratives. Answering these questions, the study aims to identify the similarities and differences in Multimodal communication practices of both affordable and luxury brand types to understand meaning construction through their advertising strategies. This research is significant as it contributes to the field of sociolinguistics and multimodal discourse studies by foregrounding language and visuals resources interactions to construct meaning in digital advertising while also providing practical insights for marketers and emerging brands, by highlighting different communication strategies and their use to target and influence specific consumers in a competitive digital marketplace.

Literature Review

Research on beauty industry advertisements highlights the role of Multimodal Discourse, where linguistic and visual elements integrate to construct and influence consumer perceptions. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) uncover advertisements ideological messages and persuasive strategies (Khasanah, 2021)(Qayyum and Ali, 2024).

A key area in literature is the significance of linguistic features in shaping advertising discourse. Studies reveal that beauty advertisements employ positive adjectives, imperative structures, and repetitions to emphasize the desirability of a product (Khasanah, 2021). The pronouns such as “you” personalize the message, while scientific terminology raises credibility and construct authority (Zahra et al., 2023)(Hartono et al., 2022). These linguistic strategies are employed not only to promote products but also shape consumer perceptions about beauty and self-improvement along with textual elements, visuals and multimodal features. Research rooted in Social Semantics reveals that colors, composition, gaze and symbolism are strategically used to attract attention and communicate brand values (Khoirunnisaa and Harti, 2023). Advertisements use celebrity endorsements and precisely curated aesthetics to align with the trending and dominant beauty standards for audience engagement purposes. Similarly, influencer-based marketing integrates reliability and authenticity to establish trust and strengthens consumer relationships (Wardhani et al., 2023).

Ideological construction is another key focus of beauty standards. Scholars argue that advertising discourse reinforces socially constructed ideals which often privilege westernized or idealized forms of beauty (Zahra et al., 2023). Through both text and visuals advertisements position consumers within specific social roles and encourage conformity to these norms. This reflects the broader role of discourse as a tool of power that shapes societal perceptions of identity and attractiveness (Khasanah, 2021). Advertisements strategies have evolved to incorporate interactivity, and engagement studies indicate that social media allows brands to merge promotional content with entertainment increasing consumer engagement and loyalty to the brand (Saeed and Khan, 2022),(Wang, 2024). Emerging brands often utilize influencer collaboration, meme culture, and conversational language to adhere to young consumers while in comparison luxury brands maintain exclusivity through minimalist visuals and controlled communication (Wang, 2024). Additionally, green marketing campaigns reveal brand incorporation with substantial narratives using language and imagery to position consumers as socially responsible participants (Hartono et al., 2022). Despite these contributions, existing research mainly

examines luxury branding, and others focus on affordable or mass-market products there is gap in comparative studies within one unified analytical framework. Furthermore, although multimodal approaches are widely applied, few studies examine textual and visual elements interactions across different brand segments within a same platform. Therefore, limited understanding of how variations in price, accessibility and target consumers are reflected in variable linguistic choices, visual aesthetics, and brand narratives. To address these, the current study conducts a comparative multimodal analysis of luxury and affordable beauty brands advertising on Instagram, within Pakistani digital sphere, examining uses of textual and visuals strategies to construct meaning and engage consumer.

Material and Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach which examine the ways luxury and affordable beauty brands construct their brand narrative through social media advertisements. This research approach is suitable because it allows detailed analysis of how these brands construct meaning, ideology through visuals and lexical strategies. It also helps in the interpretation of visual elements such as color, layout, and composition, which are important for Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Rose, 2016). The study focuses on analyzing visual components rather than consumer perception. The data consist of ten Instagram posts, from the official beauty brand accounts. These ten posts are the flagship (best-selling product) products of that beauty brand. Brands were categorized based on price, price-to-quantity ratio and distribution channels. The study also employs purposive sampling technique; it helps to select the posts which are most suitable with the research. Only promotional posts from 2024 were selected with images and captions and with higher engagement levels (approximately 10,000 likes to 30,000). Dior, Chanel, Prada, Guerlain, and YSL were categorized as luxury beauty brands, whereas, Maybelline, NYX, e.l.f., Sheglam, Essence were categorized as affordable beauty brands.

This study is based on Social Semiotic Theory, which explains how the meaning is constructed through visual and lexical elements. The theory was introduced by (Halliday, 1978b) in language, as social semiotic, where language is shaped by cultural factors, which describes language as “meaning-potential”. The Social Semiotic Theory was the foundation for (Machin and Mayr, 2012/2012) to develop Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, which examines how visuals and linguistic choices reflect ideology and power relations. This theoretical framework tells that elements like color, layout, typography and word choices are not neutral but shape meaning and influence audience. This present study employs Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis with its two analytical tools; iconography and lexical analysis (Machin and Mayr, 2012/2012). Iconography is used to examine elements like image, colors and composition to identify symbolic meanings, whereas, lexical analysis focuses on features in captions, including word choices, repetition and connotations. These two analytical tools help to analyze how beauty brands construct brand narrative through visual and lexical choices.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the current study using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) revealed that luxury and affordable beauty brands in Pakistan do not merely sell products; rather they construct two entirely distinct social realities through language and visual semiotics.

The analysis reveals that visually luxury brands: Dior, Chanel, Guerlain, Prada and YSL use minimalist compositions with soft color palettes (beige, pale pink, gold, and

neutral tones). This curated visual presentation creates an impression of refinement and sophistication. The typical exclusion of human elements, and presenting products in isolation against carefully curated backgrounds elevates products to art-like status and removes them from ordinary contexts. The use of professional studio lighting emphasizes product materiality, highlighting glossy finishes and premium textures. Dramatic shadows create visual depth associated with high-end photography.

Linguistically, luxury brands employ formal, technical language with specialized terminology (“contrasting finishes,” “radiant, softly pigmented,” “hydration formula”) positioning the brand as an authoritative knowledge source. Furthermore, the lexical emphasis on exclusivity terms (“iconic,” “limited-edition,” “collector’s,” “extraordinary”) reinforces scarcity and prestige. The captions notably omit price information, application instructions, and practical benefits. This omission assumes pre-existing knowledge and prioritizes heritage and aesthetic. Luxury brands position their offerings as heritage items with artistic and cultural significance. They establish connections to craftsmanship traditions through artistic collaborations and European terminology and create social distance that reinforces class distinctions through beauty practices. Their communication implies that beauty requires access to exclusive products and specialized knowledge.

In contrast, affordable brands Maybelline, NYX, e.l.f., Sheglam, and Essence employ vibrant colors and dynamic layouts generating a sense of accessibility. The incorporation of their own products alongside everyday objects or in use creates relevance to consumers’ daily experiences. Visually, affordable brands favor natural and warm lighting to create an inviting atmosphere. This lighting technique suggests product integration into existing routines rather than exceptional status.

Linguistically, the utilization of conversational language incorporating direct questions, exclamations, and second-person address (“Light, dark, or a blend of both?”) establishes an accessible relationship with their consumers. The lexical emphasis on accessibility terms (“customizable,” “variety,” “options,” “affordable”) highlights consumer choice and attainability and frame beauty as accessible self-expression available regardless of budget or technical expertise. Products are presented as tools for creativity and personal expression. Affordable brand advertisement frequently encourage engagement through direct calls to participate (“tag someone who...”) which fosters community engagement that challenges traditional beauty hierarchies. Affordable brand advertisements also emphasize experimentation, versatility, and the validity of diverse beauty expressions regardless of price point as they clearly state prices (“ONLY \$9 each!”) and provide detailed application guidance. This informational approach makes beauty knowledge accessible to broader audiences.

Overall, the findings revealed that beauty branding in Pakistan operates as a site of ideological construction where multimodal resources are strategically employed for social distinctions. Luxury branding reinforces exclusivity and symbolic distance, while affordable branding promotes accessibility and participation. These opposing choices illustrate visual and linguistic semiotics functioning simultaneously to construct not only brand identity but also broader cultural understandings of beauty, class, and consumer agency.

Conclusion

This study explored how luxury and affordable beauty brands in Pakistan construct their identities through language and visuals in Instagram advertisements using a multimodal discourse approach. The findings show a clear distinction between the two categories: luxury brands rely on formal language, control aesthetics, and minimal design

to create a sense of exclusivity, prestige, and refinement, while affordable brands use conversational language, engaging visuals common everyday context to promote accessibility, reliability, and practical use. These differences demonstrate that beauty advertisement goes beyond product promotion and plays a significant role in shaping consumer identities and social meanings. Luxury advertisements position consumers as elite and status-oriented, whereas affordable advertisements position them expressive, social, and connected to everyday life. Overall, the study highlights how lexical and visual choices in Pakistan work together to construct distinct brand narratives, contributing to a deeper understanding of how advertising reflects and enforces broader culture ideas related to class and identity.

Recommendations

This study contributes to the growing field of Multimodal Discourse Analysis by examining luxury and affordable beauty brands advertisements and their construction of distinct identities through lexical and visuals strategies employed. However, the scope of this study remains limited to static image-based advertisements and relatively condensed sample size within the Pakistani digital sphere. Future research should expand the corpus by including a larger sample size of advertisements across multiple social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube to provide a broader understanding of Multimodal meaning-making practices. Analysis of these comparative platforms reveal differences in consumer positioning, and brand identity construction.

Furthermore, this study mainly focuses on textual and visual semiotic resources. The future researchers are encouraged to examine additional Multimodal elements such as sound, music, motion and editing technologies used in video-based advertisements including Instagram reels and YouTube shorts. Since the contemporary digital discourse operates mainly through dynamic and interactive modes, examining these features contribute to a comprehensive understanding of multimodal discourse. The study also recommends further cross-cultural and comparative investigation between beauty brands to examine socio-cultural values, class ideologies and localized beauty standards reflected through advertisements.

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