

# **'Kiss of colour for lush lips': Exploring subjective and affective language in English and French cosmetics advertisements**

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## **1.1 Paper introduction and outline**

This paper will examine the contemporary media discourse of femininity as a sexual identity, based on critical linguistic analysis of a corpus of French and English beauty advertisements from 2011. The analysis considers the sensual language used to describe the product's effect on the relevant body part. Additionally, statistical methods are employed to compare the use of nudity in the English advertisements with the French advertisements.

Firstly, some background on the connections between sensuality and advertising discourse will be provided. In much advertising, and cosmetics advertising in particular, both text and image draw on notions of female sexuality. More specifically, a young, female, 'sexy' appearance is often represented. As part of their discussion on commodified feminine identities, Benwell and Stokoe (2006) identify a subjective, affective language present in female-targeted media which 'links even the most unlikely products to *sensation* or *sensuality*' (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 173, original emphasis). Conditioner *envelops* hair; face creams feel *luxurious*; skin is left *supple* and *beautified*; lips are *caressed*. In addition, products are often shown to be giving some kind of sensual pleasure to the female model in the advertisement, as Penny (2011: 9) argues:

Advertising surrounds us with what are supposed to be images of sensual pleasure: from advertisements for *Herbal Essences* to the iconic, forty-year campaign for *Cadbury's* Flake bar, white women's faces are caught in what we have come to understand as a rictus of simulated bliss, their eyes elegantly closed, perpetually turning away as if in embarrassment at the orgasmic effects of product X.

With regard to print media, these sexualised advertisements can be placed within the wider context of the magazine publications in which they appear. Women's glossy magazines – *Cosmopolitan* being the prototypical example – often contain high sexual content, with an emphasis on heterosexual sexual technique (Gauntlett 2008: 198-199). The sexualisation of advertising and magazine content is therefore of mutual economic benefit to the brand, advertising agency and magazine publisher.

## **1.2 Representation of the female body in media discourse**

In order to provide a contextual framework for this paper, I will briefly consider the existing literature on the representation of the female body and sensuality, with particular reference to the media, addressing both linguistic and non-linguistic approaches.

There have been numerous recent feminist treatments of female sexual (mis)representation in media discourse, including Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991); Laurie Penny's *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism* (2011); and Natasha Walter's *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (2011). Some media critics such as Levy (2006), Banyard (2011) and Durham (2009) have commented upon the increased sexualisation of young girls in Western media culture, which can be viewed within the context of an increasingly pornographic mainstream mediascape (McNair 2002; Walter 2011). Especially relevant for this paper is Wolf's (1991) concept of 'beauty pornography' in which she argues that perfume and cosmetics advertisements often contain images similar to those found in soft pornography.

In much advertising material, the sexual female body is linked to media standards of beauty and femininity. Durham (2009: 77) surmises the media message as '[...] if you're female, your desirability is contingent on blatant bodily display.'

Bodies are encouraged to conform to various standards through discipline and product usage. Walter (2011: 3) outlines:

[...] throughout much of our society the image of female perfection to which women are encouraged to aspire has become more and more defined by sexual allure.

Consequently, women deemed to be 'outside' of this advertising norm tend to be positioned as 'unsexy' in media currency.

Rosalind Gill (2009) suggests that the contemporary sexualisation of women in much Western advertising could be linked to the concept of 'commodity feminism' - the employment of feminist ideals in advertising for economic benefit –thus, a sexy body is portrayed as bringing some kind of power to the consumer. However, this seemingly postfeminist incorporation of some kind of feminist sensibility into female-targeted advertising may disguise the underlying problem of femininity being equated with a certain kind of sensual identity, and the positive, empowered discourse may make it even more difficult to critique (Gill 2009: 104).

In addition to the Benwell and Stokoe (2006) work mentioned at the start of the paper, a range of linguistic research has explored how the female body is constructed in a sensual manner in a media context.

Machin and Thornborrow (2003) analysed *Cosmopolitan* magazine content, and they found that the images in several international versions of the magazine depicted women in overtly-sexualised ways – red lipstick, long hair, revealing clothing, high heels (Machin and Thornborrow 2003: 458-161). The written articles focused on how to feel and appear sexually confident, in addition to giving out sex advice (Machin and Thornborrow 2003: 462-465).

Jeffries (2007) has analysed how magazine discourse (re)presents the female body. She argues that many female-targeted magazines link beauty with the aim of

having sex, in addition to creating the sense that readers' bodies do not match up to the required standard.

Another linguist who has addressed the use of female sexuality to sell products is Sara Mills (1995). She draws attention to the use of (semi-)nude women and a discourse of female sexuality used in advertising for economic purposes. When comparing male-targeted cosmetics advertisements with those aimed at women, she found that, in direct contrast to female beauty advertisements, male-targeted cosmetics ads did not contain images of *men*; rather they contained images of the product (Mills 1995: 178).

### **1.3 Methods**

With regards to methodology, my research analyses contemporary French and English cosmetics advertisements from May to September 2011 (inclusive). The advertisements were taken from Metropolitan French and British English editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* magazines. My corpus is what is known as a comparable corpus, in that the ads were taken from publications of the same time-frame. *Elle* magazine is monthly in the UK and weekly in France, therefore one UK *Elle* can be seen as equivalent, within the time frame, of 4-5 French *Elles*. *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan* were chosen for four main reasons: firstly, they contain many advertisements for beauty products. Secondly, print media can generally be easily sourced. Thirdly, although there are some difference between the two publications, they are broadly representative of the women's glossy genre. Finally, they are both available in the two languages, which was ideal for my cross-comparative research as it enabled collection of data at a synchronised time scale.

	(Metropolitan) French	(British-UK) English
May 2011	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> France May 2011  <i>Elle</i> France 6 May 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 13 May 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 20 May 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 27 May 2011	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> UK May 2011  <i>Elle</i> UK May 2011
June 2011	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> France June 2011  <i>Elle</i> France 3 June 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 10 June 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 17 June 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 22 June 2011	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> UK June 2011  <i>Elle</i> UK June 2011
July 2011	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> France July 2011  <i>Elle</i> France 1 July 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 8 July 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 22 July 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 29 July 2011	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> UK July 2011  <i>Elle</i> UK July 2011
August 2011	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> France August 2011  <i>Elle</i> France 5 August 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 12 August 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 19 August 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 26 August 2011	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> UK August 2011  <i>Elle</i> UK August 2011
September 2011	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> France September 2011  <i>Elle</i> France 2 September 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 9 September 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 16 September 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 23 September 2011 <i>Elle</i> France 30 September 2011	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> UK September 2011  <i>Elle</i> UK September 2011
	Total French adverts : <b>249</b>	Total English adverts: <b>246</b>

Fig. 1: Breakdown of advertisements from the corpus, including totals

My broad framework for analysis is Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). The term is generally attributed to Michelle Lazar (2005). In general, FCDA critically approaches texts using a range of linguistic methods with a feminist impetus and is often used for analysis of gendered media discourse. In addition, I use quantitative methods - the chi-square test - to compare how often some degree of nudity appears in the French data versus the English data. For the purposes of this paper, I am focusing on the analysis of lexis describing the product's effect on the relative body part and some degree of nudity in the data under analysis.

It should be noted that I found other elements of sensual discourse in my analysis, but these are the ones which will be addressed in the scope of this paper.

#### **1.4 Lexis describing the product's effect(s) on the relevant body part**

Sensual or sexual verbs and adjectives are often employed to describe the product's effect on the applicable body part, body as a whole and/or the female consumer as a unified entity. The sensual description may convey an appealing or desiring effect which the consumer can then obtain through product purchase and usage. Some examples are provided below:

1. Product and source:

*Estée Lauder* Pure Colour sensuous rouge lipstick

(*Elle* UK September 2011)

Product effect(s)

'lips have never felt this sensuous'

2. Product and source:

*Maybelline* ColourSensational The Shine lipstick

(*Elle* UK June 2011)

Product effects:

'for lips that flaunt our most spectacular shine'

3. Product and source:

*Frank Provost* soin sans-rinçage. [leave-in hair care]

(*Cosmopolitan* France July 2011)

Product effects:

'cheveux nourris jusqu'aux pointes, sublimes, faciles à coiffer' [hair which is nourished right to the tips, sublime and easy to style] (my translation)

4. Product and source:

*Maybelline* ColourSensationl Watershine lipstick

(*Elle* France 2 September 2011)

Product effects:

'Sa texture au nectar de miel glisse comme de l'eau sur vos lèvres' [Honey nectar texture glides like water on your lips] (my translation)

5. Product and source:

*Maybelline ColourSensational Lipstain*  
(*Elle* UK September 2011)

Product effects:

'kiss of colour for lush lips'

It should be noted that the consumer may already wish to achieve the effect of the product - for example, sensuous lips or lush eyelashes, but it is perhaps more likely that this may be a need or desire created, at least in part, by the advertising copy. In a general sense, these descriptions of the product effects link the cosmetic advertised to sensuality, but they also make the product more appealing through the language employed. The notion of femininity as a sexual identity is key here, as the various body parts of the women are described in sensual, sexual ways. All the consumer must do to achieve these desired effects is, apparently, buy and use the particular product.

### **1.5 Exploring nudity**

One of the visual expressions of sensual discourse in the corpus was nudity and a working definition of nudity is provided shortly. Firstly, it might be considered a stereotype or cliché that the French are more comfortable with nudity, sexual images and sexual references than, for example, Britain, Ireland or North America. However, this *is* generally borne out in the relevant literature. For example, Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes (2006) state there is often more nudity in French ads than many other European countries. Biswas, Olsen and Carlet's (1992) research compared print ads from the USA and France and found that the French adverts included more sexual appeals, and these tended to be visual.

With regard to the regulation of advertising content, the French body L'ARPP - L'Autorité de Régulation Professionnelle de la Publicité - is an independent body regulating advertising, roughly equivalent to the Advertising Standards

Authority (ASA) in the UK. In France, the CEP - Conseil de l'Ethique Publicitaire (Ethics of Advertising advisory board) - provides advice on how advertisers can adhere to the codes of practice outlined by the ARPP. They specifically address the issue of nudity in advertising, and they say in their (2011) advice publication that France is generally more tolerant of public/media nudity than many of its European neighbours. The CEP state that nudity is generally permitted, although various factors should be taken into account, however:

La publicité ne doit pas réduire la personne humaine, et en particulier la femme, à la fonction d'objet (CEP, 2011)  
 [advertising should not reduce human beings – and women in particular- to objects, my translation]

In the UK, the Committee of Advertising Practice provides advice to advertising agencies and brands on how best to comply with the Advertising Standards Authority codes of practice. Their 2012 publication ('Taste and decency') outlines:

Marketing communications featuring gratuitous use of nudity can cause serious or widespread offence, but marketers will find the public is generally more tolerant of it if the nudity is relevant to the advertised product. Lingerie and beauty advertisements are a good example of which nudity can generally be used without offending.

This links to the concept of *congruence* – which is the link between the product and the way in which it is advertised. I would argue that the nudity is *not* always relevant in beauty ads. In some cases, there is clear congruence, such as an advertisement for a body lotion depicting a woman in underwear applying the product. However, a model in underwear for a nail varnish ad is not necessarily relevant to the product advertised. Another issue is that even when there is some degree of congruence, this does not mean that the advertisement is not gratuitous, oversexualised, provocative or is without the potential to offend. In practice, in the UK highly

sexualised ads can be withdrawn if there are a number of complaints (CAP, 'Taste and decency', 2012).

Of course, it should be noted that all cases of media nudity are not necessarily sexual. However, in advertising there often *is* a sensual element, particularly when combined with other elements of the advertisement.

What have I counted as constituting 'nudity' for my purposes of analysis?

The Advertising Standards Authority has quite extensive guidelines for outdoor advertising which contains sexual images (as they have the potential to be seen by a large audience, including young children), but these guidelines prove useful for the definitions of print advertising also. In my working definition provided below, numbers 4-6 are taken from ASA advice ('ASA statement on outdoor advertising'):

1. conventional nudity: often with strategically placed items in the ad.
2. implied nudity, for example, the shot of someone's nude back.
3. very little clothing such as underwear or bikini.
4. partial or full exposure of breasts.
5. images of suggestive undressing.
6. ads which draw attention to body parts in a sexually suggestive manner.

Out of 246 English ads, 18 contained nudity (or some element of nudity as outlined above) which is 7% of all English ads from the corpus. In comparison, 44 out of 249 French ads contained nudity, which works out at 18%. I conducted a chi-square test which is used to measure the significance of different frequencies between groups. The null hypothesis is that there is no significant difference between the occurrence of nudity in the French data compared to the English data. The alternative hypothesis is that there is a difference between the occurrence of nudity in the French data compared to the English data. The test produced a *p* value

of  $<0.001$  which is less than the 0.05 percent significance level, which means we fail to accept the null hypothesis and can conclude that the differences between the occurrences of nudity in the French data than the English data are statistically significant. This supports Biswas, Olsen and Carlet's (1992) study mentioned earlier in the paper: that there are more visual sexual appeals in French than in UK advertising.

I will consider now the potential motivation behind use of nudity in ads. Economic concerns over advertising sponsorship are no doubt a factor in the way in which magazines can express clear concerns over the sexual objectification of women in the context of prostitution, strip clubs and Page 3 models, amidst a sea of cosmetics advertisements featuring semi-nude women. The economic impetus may go some way to explain the rather strange phenomenon that is the occurrence of advertisements containing sexualised female models in magazines which a predominantly heterosexual female demographic. Beyond any notions of objectification, perhaps the images of semi-nude women could also be viewed in some way as aspir- or inspirational for the female viewer: she may aim to attain their standards of beauty, and the promise of sexuality and sensuality that goes along with it. Of course, the relationship between the media and body image is a complex one, and the active nature of consumers must be emphasised. However, even if women are resistant to the images on offer, it is still significant that these are the images on display in the media in their society, community, and, quite often, their bedside table.

If we consider reader response in a little more detail, Dudley's (1999) research into consumer attitudes towards nudity in US advertising found that

increased nudity was often seen as offensive but was also a useful technique for attracting the consumer's attention.

In Beetles and Harris' (2005) study of UK consumer attitudes toward female nudity in advertising, the issue of congruence was a key factor in determining positive or negative reactions from the reader response group. Participants were often irritated or angered by the apparent lack of congruence for some of the products (Beetles and Harris 2005: 416-409). In addition, the notion that 'sex sells' may not necessarily be the case, as participants in Beetles and Harris' study appeared to be bored by advertisers' frequent use of female nudity, leading the authors of the study to conclude that female nudity in advertising may be overused and therefore may not attain the desired positive consumer reaction.

In Manceau and Tissier-Desbordes' (2005) study of French consumer perceptions, they found that women and older people were generally more intolerant to higher levels of sex and nudity in advertising.

## **1.6 Conclusions**

To conclude, this paper explored the use of sensual discourse in English and French cosmetics advertising through critical textual and quantitative analysis. The French data from the corpus was found to make greater use of nudity than the English advertisements. Further research could be done to explore whether this was a common feature of French advertising discourse in general, and not just limited to beauty adverts, within the time frame of analysis.

As I have suggested throughout this paper, the construct of femininity proposed – or, perhaps more accurately, *presupposed* – in these advertisements is that of a young, sexual female. The beauty products advertised are often described

using language with sensual connotations, which facilitates a connection between the particular cosmetic advertised and a sensual, indulgent pleasure which can apparently be derived from its usage. Consumers should not be construed as passive, and in theory the target consumer may appreciate the use of sexualised image and text in a given advertisement – or, she may ‘recognise’ that a particular model of femininity is being promoted in these media materials, but could disregard this and disassociate herself from media femininity constructs. Nonetheless, women may wish to attain these pervasive media models of femininity, further strengthening the argument that media publications could have detrimental effects on women’s body confidence.

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