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THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING TEXTS – A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The article examines the linguistic construction of femininity in contemporary advertising discourse. It examines the lexical, semantic, stylistic, and persuasive strategies employed to represent women. The study employs qualitative semantic–stylistic analysis informed by feminist stylistics and gender linguistics. The material comprises advertising slogans, catchphrases, and narrative texts classified according to Bator's (1998) typology. The analysis focuses on vocabulary, evaluative language, metaphors, rhetorical devices, and gender roles. The findings reveal the coexistence of traditional stereotypes and modern images emphasizing autonomy and self-realization. Femvertising challenges traditional representations while retaining ideals related to appearance and perfection. The results demonstrate that changes in the portrayal of women remain gradual and uneven. Advertising language continues to shape social perceptions of femininity and gender roles. The study contributes to research on advertising discourse, gender, and marketing communication.
Keywords: linguistic mapping of the world; image of women; advertising; femvertising; gender discourse.

1. Introduction

The article focuses on the analysis of the cultural and linguistic image of women in advertisements and evaluates the extent to which the language

used by advertising characters reflects stereotypical perceptions of women. Studies by Barancovaite (2006), Bator (1998), Dziewanowska (2004), and Siemieńska (1997) emphasize the importance of advertising as a source of knowledge about social representations of gender. Previous analyses suggest that advertisements often reinforce traditional roles of women—particularly those related to domestic responsibilities (cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare)—and highlight the importance of appearance and body care.

At the same time, recent years have seen a gradual evolution in the way women are portrayed: alongside the traditional role of a homemaker, there emerges the image of an independent, active, professionally fulfilled woman who engages in activities previously associated mainly with men. However, this process is uneven and remains a subject of ongoing debate.

It should be noted that although some examples analysed in this study originate from earlier advertising campaigns, they remain relevant for examining long-term patterns of gender representation and the persistence of specific cultural models of femininity. Nevertheless, the contemporary relevance of the analysed corpus requires consideration, particularly in relation to the rapid transformation of advertising communication in digital environments, where representations of women are increasingly shaped by social media, influencer culture, and interactive forms of marketing discourse.

This article aims to present the current shaping of the image of women in advertisements and to determine their position on the continuum between stereotypical and modern representations of femininity. This analysis makes it possible to identify trends in breaking gender stereotypes and indicates directions of change in the representation of women in advertising.

In addition, the study situates the analysis within current discussions on femvertising, understood not only as a strategy challenging traditional gender stereotypes but also as a phenomenon requiring critical examination. Contemporary research highlights the ambivalent character of femvertising: while it may promote messages of empowerment, autonomy, and diversity, it may simultaneously transform feminist ideas into commercially attractive narratives that serve marketing purposes.

2. Gender as an area of linguistic and cultural research

Recent approaches to gender and advertising studies have increasingly emphasized the importance of intersectionality and diversity in analysing representations of femininity. Contemporary advertising discourse does not construct a single universal image of "woman"; rather, it produces multiple representations shaped by factors such as age, ethnicity, social background, body type, sexuality, and cultural context (Gill, 2007; Windels, 2016; So-

bande, 2020). Therefore, analyses of advertising communication increasingly move beyond binary models of gender representation and examine how different identities are negotiated within commercial discourse (Crenshaw, 1989; Duffy, 2018).

Recent sociolinguistic approaches similarly question essentialist assumptions about fixed differences between "women's" and "men's" language. Instead of treating gender as a stable category determining communication patterns, contemporary research emphasizes that gender is constructed and negotiated through social interaction, communicative practices, and specific cultural contexts (West & Zimmerman, 1991; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). The concept of communities of practice highlights that linguistic behaviour is shaped not only by gender but also by social roles, experiences, and group affiliations. Moreover, an intersectional perspective demonstrates that gender cannot be analysed separately from other dimensions of identity, as meanings associated with femininity emerge through the interaction of multiple social and cultural factors.

Furthermore, recent scholarship on postfeminist advertising points to the complex relationship between feminism and consumer culture. Postfeminist advertising frequently incorporates concepts such as independence, self-confidence, and personal choice; however, these ideals are often presented through consumption practices, suggesting that empowerment can be achieved through purchasing particular products or improving one's appearance (Gill, 2007; Lazar, 2009). This perspective is particularly relevant for analysing femvertising, which operates between genuine social engagement and commercially motivated branding strategies (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Champlin et al., 2019; Kapoor & Munjal, 2019).

In this context, the present study does not focus on differences between male and female communication styles but rather examines the linguistic construction of the image of women in Polish advertising discourse. The analysis concentrates on the ways in which advertising language conceptualizes femininity, assigns social roles to women, and reproduces or challenges culturally established meanings related to womanhood.

In contrast to biological sex, gender refers to the psychological, social, and cultural differences between women and men (Giddens, 2004, p. 128). According to Giddens (2004, p. 129), socialization into gender roles constitutes one of the key factors shaping an individual's gender identity. Advertisements play a significant role in the process of socialization—they shape attitudes, influence beliefs, and affect the language used by women and men.

Robin Lakoff (1975) argues that girls are socialized to use language differently from boys—more cautious, complimentary, and subtle. In her view, women's language reflects subordination, uncertainty, and a lower social status.

A different approach is presented by the difference theory (Wodak & Benke, 1997; Weatherall, 2002; Cameron, 1992; Maltz & Borker, 1982). It assumes that women and men communicate within distinct communicative cultures, which leads to a so-called communication gap (Weatherall, 2002, p. 70). This gap results from different patterns of socialization, including the fact that children often grow up in same-sex groups, acquiring different verbal and non-verbal skills (Wodak & Schulz, 1985).

Contemporary theories emphasize the socially constructed nature of gender (Giddens, 2004, p. 132). From this perspective, gender identity is dynamic and intersectional, shaped through repeated communicative practices (West & Zimmerman, 1991). Language not only reflects but also co-constructs gender. According to Uchida (1992), gender is a dynamic structure that shapes our understanding of ourselves within a social context.

Thus, contemporary gender studies move beyond the view of language as a direct reflection of biological sex differences and emphasize the role of discourse in producing and negotiating social meanings. In advertising, linguistic choices contribute to the construction of particular models of femininity, which may simultaneously reproduce traditional expectations and introduce new forms of female identity.

Language plays a key role in constructing the image of the world, including femininity and masculinity (Marszałek, 2000, p. 286). The acquisition of meanings and values associated with gender is a prerequisite for participation in culture and social life.

3. Research methodology

Currently, there are many definitions of language; however, most of them consistently point to its systemic nature. This observation provides the rationale for applying a semantic methodology in the analysis of advertising texts.

In this study, two understandings of the concept of a system were adopted:

— as a set of units belonging to a given level (e.g., lexis),
— as a network of relationships between linguistic units and the extralinguistic world.

According to Tokarski (2001), examining a word in isolation leads to the loss of essential data—meaning arises from its relations with other elements of the system as well as from context.

The research methodology combines semantic–stylistic analysis with elements of feminist stylistics and gender linguistics. The study does not aim to examine hierarchical levels of language structure or formal levels of text organisation; instead, it focuses on the linguistic means through which the

image of women is constructed in advertising discourse. The analysed categories include lexical choices, semantic associations, evaluative expressions, metaphorical patterns, forms of address, and persuasive strategies that contribute to the conceptualisation of femininity.

The analysis was conducted between June 2024 and October 2024. The selection of advertising material was based on representative examples from mass media, including television, print, and online advertisements, as well as slogans and narratives addressed to different age and social groups. The selection criteria included the diversity of female representations and the availability of complete advertising texts.

The corpus was constructed using purposive sampling, which is commonly applied in qualitative discourse-oriented research when the aim is to select materials that are particularly relevant to the research questions rather than to achieve statistical representativeness (Dörnyei, 2007; Schreier, 2012). The selected advertisements were chosen because they contained explicit representations of femininity and allowed the identification of recurring linguistic and cultural patterns related to gender roles, appearance, agency, and social expectations. Although some analysed examples originate from earlier advertising campaigns, their inclusion enables the examination of persistent representational patterns and the continuity of gendered advertising strategies over time. At the same time, the corpus includes contemporary online advertising materials in order to reflect the changing conditions of advertising communication in the digital era, where gender representations are increasingly shaped by interactive media environments and new forms of consumer engagement (Gill, 2007; Duffy, 2018).

The analysis consisted of two complementary stages:

a) a qualitative socio-cultural interpretation of the models of femininity constructed in selected advertisements, with particular attention to the social roles, values, and expectations attributed to women;
b) a linguistic analysis of advertising texts focusing on lexical, semantic, and stylistic features, including vocabulary, evaluative language, metaphorical structures, grammatical forms, and rhetorical devices used to construct particular images of women.

The methodology is inspired by the concepts presented by Sara Mills (1995) in Feminist Stylistics and by Małgorzata Karwatowska and Jolanta Szpyra-Kozłowska (2005) in Lingwistyka płci (Gender Linguistics). Following these approaches, the analysis treats language as a resource through which social meanings, identities, and cultural models of femininity are produced and negotiated. The lexical analysis included, among others, the following phenomena: androcentrism, lexical gaps, connotative differences between masculine and feminine forms, and stereotyping.

A secondary aim of the study was to evaluate messages concerning femininity present in femvertising. This trend—as noted by Kończak (2023, p. 10) — opposes the objectification of women, challenges stereotypes, eliminates gender inequalities, and strengthens the self-confidence of female audiences.

4. The cultural and linguistic image of women in advertising texts

For this study, the typology of female representations in advertising language proposed by Bator (1998) was adopted. It distinguishes two main types: the traditional woman and the modern woman.

During the identification of elements constituting the image of the traditional and modern woman, the roles most frequently emerging from the analysis were taken into account. Consequently, the traditional woman is understood as a person fulfilling the roles of wife, mother, and housewife, whereas the modern woman is perceived as a working woman, an object of desire, or an active/liberated individual.

The analysis presented in this section is based on qualitative semantic–stylistic interpretation of selected advertising texts. The examples were selected according to their relevance to the research objectives and their ability to illustrate recurring linguistic patterns used to construct particular models of femininity. The analysis does not aim at measuring the frequency of individual phenomena statistically; rather, it focuses on the meanings, connotations, and communicative functions of linguistic choices occurring in advertising discourse.

The interpretation of the advertising messages takes into account lexical meanings, semantic associations, evaluative expressions, metaphorical structures, grammatical forms, and rhetorical strategies. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between linguistic forms and the cultural meanings they evoke, as advertising language not only reflects existing models of femininity but also participates in their reproduction and transformation.

4.1. The traditional woman

Advertisements referring to the image of the "traditional woman" clearly draw on socially established stereotypes. These stereotypes assign women primarily the role of caring for children (and often also for the husband) and managing the household, which includes activities such as cooking, cleaning, washing, etc. Moreover, these stereotypes are associated with a specific set of personality traits attributed to women, such as emotionality, willingness

and readiness for self-sacrifice, sensitivity, gentleness, warmth, helpfulness, and submissiveness (Wasilewska, 1997, p. 84).

Based on the analysis of advertising texts, three most frequently occurring roles were identified: the Polish Mother (Matka Polka), the wife, and the housewife. These roles are particularly dominant in advertisements for food products and cleaning agents, explicitly referring to the traditional perception of women as the "Polish Mother" and the primary person responsible for family care. In advertisements, the woman performing the role of mother often appears in the context of promoting food products, childcare items, and cleaning products.

The linguistic construction of the maternal role is reinforced by recurring lexical choices associated with care, responsibility, and protection. Expressions referring to children, family needs, and domestic well-being create a semantic field in which femininity is closely connected with responsibility for others.

In food advertisements, the image of the mother as the person responsible for selecting products for her family frequently appears. The mother, as a caregiver and nurturer, makes decisions regarding meals, which is clearly visible in advertising narratives. For instance, the popularity of this motif in advertisements for food products such as Morliny cold cuts emphasizes the role of the mother as the decision-maker in choosing food for the family, often summarized with the phrase "something we all like." Mothers are presented as individuals who know perfectly well what is best for their children, as in the case of Danone, where "the child is better prepared for their small challenges." The mother's authority in matters of food is unquestionable, as she simply "knows what is good" for her children (LU Petitki).

Another frequently occurring role of women within their traditional image in advertisements is that of the housewife. The housewife is responsible for maintaining cleanliness in the home and for feeding her family; therefore, her image is particularly common in advertisements for cleaning products and food items. It is worth noting that the housewife usually combines other features of the "traditional woman," often being simultaneously a wife (caring for her husband's shirts) and a mother (dealing with cocoa stains on her daughter's dress). Housewives are typically portrayed in domestic spaces, especially in the kitchen and bathroom, although outdoor scenes also appear, where sunlight emphasizes the cleanliness of freshly washed clothes. Women performing these roles are often given instructions by experts, typically male voices, explaining how to remove difficult stains (as in the case of Persil, which "wins the fight against chocolate stains") and how to maintain toilet hygiene.

The use of stereotypical roles of the housewife and mother is particularly intense in advertisements for cleaning products. In an advertisement for

Ludwik dishwashing liquid, cheerful women representing four generations state that "dishwashing liquid is a matter of trust," while Ludwik is described as "reliable," "fast," and "economical." Through personification, the advertised product becomes a fictional agent performing tasks that would normally fall to a woman, such as washing dishes and cleaning. In this way, the woman is symbolically relieved of these duties, as it is not she who performs them, but rather Ludwik/Ajax that subsequently receives recognition and gratitude.

These examples demonstrate that the analysed expressions perform not only an informative but also an evaluative function. The verbs and phrases referring to knowing, choosing, and caring construct the mother as a competent and responsible figure, while simultaneously reinforcing the traditional association between femininity and family-oriented duties.

4.2. The modern woman

Another way of presenting women in advertisements is through references to contemporary trends and practices. Western advertisements functioned here as a kind of "Trojan horse," introducing new patterns and stimulating new aspirations. Contemporary women take care of themselves, are active, including professionally, and are not limited solely to caring for household cleanliness or family duties. Women described as "modern" are often portrayed as beautiful, attractive, and active.

In contrast to the traditional model, the linguistic construction of the modern woman relies on semantic fields connected with individuality, self-development, attractiveness, and personal agency. However, the analysis also considers the ambivalent character of these messages, as expressions of independence and self-realization are frequently combined with expectations concerning appearance and physical attractiveness.

The vast majority of advertising slogans addressed to women concerned cosmetic products. These advertisements feature beautiful women who encourage the use of advertised shampoos, creams, lotions, and other body care products, appealing to the authority of nature, science, and modernity. Their messages often also refer to everyday situations or adopt a confessional rhetoric.

These beautiful women, sometimes described as narcissistic consumers, fully devote themselves to activities aimed at improving, restoring, or maintaining their appearance. According to Bator (1998), while "traditional women" may be confined to the domestic sphere, "modern women" are enclosed within the prison of their own bodies. The protagonists of these advertisements engage in struggles with problems such as dry hair ends, use creams with mysterious ingredients (such as liposomes, microparticles, vitamin complexes), or remove body hair—this active approach to the body

symbolizes control over one's own life. Table 1 presents popular advertising slogans for cosmetic products targeted at women.

The slogans presented in Table 1 are provided in English translation for the purpose of international accessibility. The original advertising texts were analysed in Polish, as the research focuses on the linguistic image of women in Polish advertising discourse. Therefore, the analysis concerns the lexical, semantic, and stylistic features of the original Polish slogans, while the translated versions serve only as illustrative equivalents.

Table 1
Advertising slogans for cosmetic products

no	Slogan	Brand
1	You're worth it.	L'Oreal
2	Maybe she's born with it. Maybe it's Maybelline.	Maybelline
3	Recall your authentic "self." Discover your style, your destiny […] Be an icon. Be yourself.	Estetica
4	Beauty hidden in molecules. Feel amazing in your body.	Bielenda
5	I am beautiful because I like and accept myself	Dove
6	Beautiful, smooth, rejuvenated.	Perfecta
7	My glow is hidden deep inside. It's time to release it.	Dermica
8	Certain girls can do more.	Garnier
9	Sensitivity is my strength.	AA Cosmetics
10	Rediscover your skin. Rediscover yourself.	Nivea

Source: Own research.

The analysis of these slogans shows that persuasive strategies are based on specific linguistic mechanisms, including direct forms of address, possessive constructions, evaluative adjectives, and expressions associated with authenticity and self-improvement. These elements create an impression of individual communication between the brand and the consumer, while simultaneously constructing a particular model of femininity based on self-care, attractiveness, and personal transformation.

An important role is also played by expressions that build a sense of closeness and community. Particularly interesting is the use of the word "icon," which represents a modern extension of its traditional meaning. Moreover, advertising texts often break with traditional female representations by presenting a modern, fashionable girl or woman in the context of magical thinking, suggesting that one can influence both oneself and the surrounding world. Expressions such as "beautiful," "standard of beauty," or "dream" are used to reinforce positive values.

The linguistic image of women—or rather girls—in advertisements for hygiene products clearly departs from the traditional one. The most common way of presenting this group of women is by emphasizing their activity—both professional and athletic—which remains unaffected by the occurrence of "those difficult days." Such advertisements often rely on the authority of science, novelty, and modernity, frequently reinforced by the use of pseudo-scientific terminology (e.g., microchannels, tampons designed by a gynecologist, "amazing EffiCapt material," "the only one with dynamic feet technology," etc.).

Despite the growing openness and acceptance of society toward advertisements for hygiene products, certain taboos and omissions still persist. This is reflected in the desexualized portrayal of women and in the use of euphemisms to explain why women need sanitary pads and tampons. In an advertisement for Always, the expression "nothing and nobody will limit me" was noted. The woman is portrayed as completely sterile and hygienic, while the advertised products allow her an "enhanced struggle with her own nature" (Bator, 1998: 33). Moreover, in another hygiene product advertisement for tampons, the issue of women's rights—namely freedom—is explicitly invoked: "Tampons have given women freedom and allow them to function as they wish every day of the month without restrictions." The text emphasizes the possibility of self-determination according to one's own will.

Another approach to presenting the image of the "modern woman" is to characterize it through the roles performed by female protagonists in advertisements associated with this image. The roles identified in the previously conducted analysis are used here: object of desire; professionally active woman; active and liberated woman. Typical product categories advertised by "modern women" include cosmetics, telecommunication and banking services, as well as beverages, and, less frequently, food products. An example is the advertising slogan for a telecommunications network: "Finally a FORMULA for my family," or "I switched to Play because I'm into their online services." It is worth noting here the persuasive function of the possessive pronoun, e.g., "my (family)," which strengthens the message. Moreover, the woman focuses primarily on herself and what interests her.

The most frequent role played by the "modern woman" is that of an object of desire, both for men and for women. This is usually associated with her external appearance, which may be presented holistically or in a fragmented manner. Women who function as objects of desire are always shown as attractive and well-groomed, which naturally results from the fact that such an image is most commonly used in cosmetic advertisements.

Additionally, expressions such as "scientifically proven effectiveness," "60% wrinkle reduction," or "93% cleansing efficiency" frequently appear, aiming to enhance the credibility of the message. The rhetoric of this type of

advertising refers to two main schemas: appeals to the authority of science and nature, and appeals to self-love. In the first case, products are presented as possessing miraculous properties based on scientific and pseudo-scientific evidence. For example, Garnier products "understand the needs of your hair," Schauma "contains even more vitamins," Garnier Lift "contains cherry extract and ginger," GlissKur "recognizes hair structure," Neutrogena Visibly Young "tightens pores" or simply Dove and Nivea Visage products that "deeply moisturize the skin."

The second schema, related to self-love, is based on the promise that one can be "beautifully oneself" provided that the advertised product is used. Beautiful and happy women assure that self-care and attention to every aspect of the body bring satisfaction, acceptance, and admiration from others. For instance, a young model claims that her legs look great thanks to a depilatory foam (Veet), even after several days, while with a firming tanning lotion, every woman can make a splash on the beach (Nivea).

A frequent concern of these narcissistic consumers is the choice of hairstyle, which is reflected in infantile questions such as "should I style my hair this way or that way?" (Decore), or statements like "what to choose: color or protection?" The use of advertised products also provides a sense of freedom and independence. This motif often recurs in Fa advertisements—a young girl states that thanks to her deodorant, "freshness is under control because she cannot be responsible for herself."

The second aspect of the "modern woman" image is her professional activity. In advertisements presenting working women, products directly related to their work are rarely promoted. Most commonly, the advertised products are limited to cosmetics, breath fresheners, or food products. An example is the advertising text for the Knorr brand: "This is my secret weapon. Pretty good, right? Every meal is an opportunity."

The final type of female image emerging from the analysis is that of the active and liberated woman. This portrayal of the "modern woman" often appears in advertisements for mobile telephony, beverages, and sometimes food products. These messages are addressed both to women and men, usually belonging to younger age groups. Advertising slogans often emphasize extraordinariness, activity, and breaking stereotypes, such as: "Break barriers" (Tampo Bella), "Do it your way – there are a million ways, each the best" (Sprite), "A tariff like you" (Era).

5. Conclusion

The subject of the research presented in this article is the cultural and linguistic image of women in advertising texts. Based on the conducted anal-

ysis, it can be concluded that the representation of women in the examined advertisements is not symmetrical, which may contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. A considerable diversity in the ways women are portrayed can be observed, with the note that their image is sometimes pejorative and reveals various forms of gender inequality. In the analysed material, women are predominantly presented as individuals focused on improving their physical appearance, while their function is largely limited to domestic responsibilities.

The analysis confirms that the linguistic image of women in advertising is constructed through recurring lexical, semantic, and stylistic patterns. The examined advertisements employ evaluative vocabulary, metaphorical structures, forms of direct address, and persuasive strategies that associate femininity with particular social roles, values, and expectations. On the one hand, advertising discourse reinforces traditional models of femininity by linking women primarily with motherhood, domestic responsibilities, care, and physical attractiveness. On the other hand, it introduces contemporary models based on autonomy, activity, self-realization, and individual choice. Thus, the linguistic analysis demonstrates that advertising discourse does not present a uniform image of women but constructs diverse and sometimes contradictory models of femininity.

The analysis of femvertising demonstrates that contemporary advertising discourse does not simply replace traditional stereotypes with fully emancipatory representations. Although femvertising frequently promotes narratives of independence, self-confidence, authenticity, and female empowerment, these values are often embedded within consumer-oriented frameworks. As a result, empowerment may become closely associated with purchasing choices, self-improvement practices, and the achievement of socially desirable forms of femininity. Therefore, femvertising should be understood as an ambivalent phenomenon: it may contribute to challenging restrictive gender norms while simultaneously transforming feminist ideas into commercially valuable marketing strategies (Gill, 2007; Lazar, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Sobande, 2020). The findings of this study support the view that advertising operates simultaneously as a space of social change and as a mechanism through which existing cultural expectations may be reproduced.

Consequently, the primary aim of the study—to reconstruct the contemporary linguistic image of women in advertising discourse and to identify the linguistic mechanisms involved in its construction—has been achieved. The findings show that changes in the portrayal of women are gradual and uneven: while contemporary advertising increasingly incorporates elements of empowerment and agency, traditional patterns of femininity remain visible at the level of language, evaluation, and persuasive strategies.

Overall, contemporary differences in women's roles and status are now presented in a more subtle way than in the past (Barancovaite 2006; Bator 1998; Dziewańska 2004; Siemieńska 1997).

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