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The Illusion of Perfection: A Discourse Analysis of Weight Loss and Skincare Advertisements and Their Impact on Consumer Perception

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Abstract

This paper examines the portrayal of women in media using the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Drawing on sociolinguistic approaches and discourse strategies, it investigates how advertisements contribute to the construction of female identity and the reinforcement of dominant social ideologies. The study focuses on four advertisements promoting weight-loss and skincare products and applies Fairclough's three-dimensional model to analyze both linguistic and visual elements. Through this model, the paper uncovers how media texts normalize specific body standards, particularly the idealization of thinness among women. It also highlights how discourse not only reflects but actively shapes societal expectations related to gender and appearance. The paper further traces the evolution of media studies within linguistics, illustrating how discourse analysis offers valuable insights into the mechanisms through which ideologies are embedded in seemingly neutral promotional content. The findings call attention to the need for a more critical awareness of how language and visuals are employed in media to sustain narrow and often harmful representations of women. This approach highlights the importance of questioning everyday media narratives and the social assumptions they propagate.

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1. Introduction

The representation of idealized standards of beauty and health in commercial advertising is far from neutral or innocuous. Advertisements, particularly those centred around weight loss and skincare, act as powerful ideological mechanisms, disseminating restricted conceptions of physical attractiveness under labels such as personal wellness, lifestyle improvement, or individual empowerment (Güç, 2024). This study examines how media texts employ linguistic and visual strategies to construct and perpetuate these ideals, reinforcing dominant ideologies and shaping consumer identities.

Grounded in sociolinguistics, this research aligns with the broader exploration of how language reflects and reproduces social meanings and power dynamics. Sociolinguistic scholarship emphasizes that language usage is inherently social, signalling group affiliation, power structures, and personal identity (Blommaert, 2018; Coupland, 1997). The complex relationship between linguistic choices and social contexts is central to understanding advertising, as advertisements do not merely provide information but strategically guide and shape public attitudes, especially concerning gender norms, beauty standards, and health perceptions. Scholars like Lazar (2017) highlight how sociolinguistic inquiry reveals gendered discourses, politeness conventions, and

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language attitudes, all relevant to decoding communication strategies in advertisements aimed predominantly at women.

Within this framework, discourse extends beyond linguistic exchanges to encompass structured ways of thinking and acting, shaped by social and ideological influences (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Discourses of wellness, femininity, or body positivity, though seemingly progressive, often mask implicit norms and exclusions. The critical analysis of these discourses involves questioning not just their explicit content but the sociocultural narratives that shape and are perpetuated by such content. Van Dijk (1998, 2015) argues that discourse analysis must consider language use, cognition, and social practice, recognizing the importance of examining the producers, distribution channels, and contexts of interpretation.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a robust methodological approach to uncovering ideological messages within advertisements. CDA identifies language as inherently linked to social practices and implicated in sustaining power inequalities and ideological dominance (Fairclough, 1993; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Advertisements thus not only offer product choices but also craft desires, construct consumer needs, and attribute moral significance to specific consumption behaviours. For instance, skincare advertisements promising "morning wali soft & fresh skin" implicitly classify certain skin textures as desirable, reinforcing existing societal standards. Similarly, advertisements associating cereals with slimness embed norms about ideal body types, health perceptions, and femininity aligned with prevalent social ideals (Gill, 2007; Ringrow, 2016).

The concept of "the illusion of perfection" refers explicitly to the manufactured nature of idealized images presented in advertisements—images frequently unattainable yet depicted as achievable through disciplined consumption. Such illusions are compelling precisely because they operate subtly rather than coercively, utilizing persuasive strategies such as personal testimonials, pseudo-scientific language, emotionally appealing content, and cultural symbolism. Eagleton (1991) describes such ideological strategies as "socially necessary illusions," which lend coherence to lived realities while simultaneously obscuring structural inequalities.

Furthermore, advertisements function within broader global capitalist frameworks that commodify self-worth and health. Health-related brands often construct gender-specific narratives concerning responsibility, self-care, and attractiveness. Fairclough's (1995, 2013) three-dimensional model—textual analysis, discursive practices, and sociocultural contexts—is especially effective for deconstructing these narratives. Linguistic elements like imperatives ("Be Special"), scientific jargon ("prebiotic advantage"), and naturalistic claims ("100% plant origin") aim to persuade consumers at the textual level. At the discursive level, these messages circulate within media-dense cultures where beauty and health become personal obligations. At the sociocultural level, these discourses reinforce neoliberal values of individual accountability, especially targeting female consumers (Lazar, 2017; Rottenberg, 2018).

This research does not treat advertisements merely as commercial messages but as critical sites for ideological production. The analysis examines four specific advertisements—two related to weight loss and two related to skincare—to explore how these media constructs sustain the illusion of perfection through linguistic and visual discourse strategies. The objective is to discern the mechanisms by which consumer perceptions are influenced and critically interrogate underlying cultural assumptions. Employing CDA, this paper contributes to critical media literacy and aims to problematize contemporary definitions and commodification of beauty and health.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly research over the past few decades has consistently highlighted the role of advertising in reinforcing gendered ideals and body image norms, particularly in the portrayal of women. Advertising discourse has been identified as a powerful vehicle for the circulation of social ideologies that present beauty, thinness, and fairness as essential components of femininity (Gill, 2007; Lazar, 2017). These representations are not merely reflective of societal preferences but play an active role in shaping how gendered bodies are evaluated and regulated in everyday life.

Feminist media theorists have long argued that the female body in advertising is subject to discursive control. Susan Bordo (2003) emphasizes that the media promotes an aesthetic ideal that is nearly unattainable for most women, contributing to a culture of bodily dissatisfaction. Similarly, Naomi Wolf (2002) suggests that beauty functions as a form of social control, with advertising playing a central role in creating and reinforcing standards that prioritize appearance over intellect or capability. Contemporary research continues to affirm that beauty ideals—particularly those focused on slimness and clear, light-toned skin—are persistently marketed as both desirable and achievable, provided one consumes the right products (Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017).

In the Indian context, studies have pointed to the transnational nature of beauty norms and how advertising in post-liberalization India has internalized global aesthetics while catering to localized cultural codes (Parameswaran, 2004). These advertisements often blend Western beauty standards with regional aspirations, constructing consumer femininity around ideals of control, purity, and moral responsibility. Particularly in skincare and weight loss advertisements, the body is positioned not only as a personal project but as a site of moral discipline. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, this commodification of the self through beauty and wellness is often presented in the language of empowerment, even though it remains anchored in patriarchal logic.

There is also increasing concern about how such discourses influence consumer perception and self-evaluation. A meta-analysis by Huang, Peng, and Ahn (2021) indicates that exposure to idealized media images is associated with increased body dissatisfaction, especially among young women. While some advertising attempts to signal inclusivity and self-care, the linguistic strategies often continue to circulate aspirational norms disguised as health advice or scientific truths.

Despite the growing literature on media, gender, and body image, there is a noticeable gap in discourse-analytical studies that combine linguistic, visual, and ideological analysis in a structured manner. Many studies address representation but do not systematically analyse the language practices that produce such meanings. This paper addresses that gap by using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis model to unpack how weight loss and skincare advertisements construct and naturalize narrow definitions of beauty. The model's attention to textual features, production-consumption dynamics, and sociocultural context offers a comprehensive approach to understanding how language is used to shape consumer beliefs and behaviours.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the broader domain of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which serves as the principal theoretical framework for interpreting how advertising discourse functions ideologically. The analysis is informed by Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which enables a layered examination of how language use in advertisements operates at textual, discursive, and sociocultural levels (Fairclough, 1995). Rather than treating advertisements as isolated marketing tools, this framework conceptualizes them as complex semiotic events embedded in wider systems of power and representation.

CDA is distinct in its commitment to understanding discourse not simply as a mode of communication but as a site of ideological work. It concerns itself with how social power, dominance, and inequality are enacted and reproduced through discourse (van Dijk, 2015). Within advertising, discourse operates not only to persuade consumers but also to naturalize specific social values—particularly those associated with gender norms, body politics, and health consciousness. These texts do not merely reflect existing beliefs but participate in shaping what is thinkable, desirable, or attainable within a given socio-cultural environment.

The decision to adopt Fairclough's model is grounded in its capacity to engage with multimodal texts—an essential consideration for analyzing advertisements that integrate linguistic, visual, and symbolic elements. The framework's first level, *textual analysis*, involves examining word choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical techniques that constitute the linguistic face of the advertisement. Particular attention is paid to how language creates alignment with scientific authority, moral responsibility, or emotional appeal, depending on the product being promoted. For instance, the selective use of health-related terminology and personalized narratives ("My secret to healthy weight reduction") often lends authenticity while deflecting critical scrutiny.

The second dimension, *discursive practice*, addresses how these texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted within institutional settings. This aspect is particularly relevant in advertising, where content creation is shaped by commercial objectives, brand identity, and audience targeting strategies. Intertextuality—the way advertisements echo, reframe, or reproduce other societal narratives—is a key focus here. Media discourse often draws on familiar cultural scripts (e.g., beauty as confidence, self-care as consumption), which are reiterated across platforms and normalized through repetition.

The third and most expansive level, *sociocultural practice*, places the text within broader ideological formations. This dimension considers how media discourses reproduce dominant assumptions about gender, body image, health, and consumer responsibility. For example, when thinness is routinely represented as a marker of discipline and desirability, it becomes not just a beauty norm but a moral imperative. Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse plays a role in legitimizing or contesting hegemonic structures; hence, the portrayal of idealized bodies and skincare routines can be read as contributions to—or disruptions of—existing power relations.

To complement Fairclough's model, the study also engages with the concept of ideology as elaborated by theorists such as Eagleton (1991) and van Dijk (2001). Eagleton contends that ideology cannot be pinned down

to a singular definition; it includes systems of belief, modes of representation, and processes of misrecognition that support or obscure power asymmetries. In advertising discourse, ideological meaning is rarely overt. It is embedded in the naturalized framing of health, beauty, and self-worth as commodities that can be accessed through consumption. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model supports this understanding by highlighting how discourse contributes to shared mental representations and collective understandings of social roles and hierarchies.

The ideological functioning of advertising is particularly visible in its treatment of gender. Media representations of women are frequently organized around aesthetic ideals, emotional appeal, and moral self-regulation. These constructions are rarely challenged in commercial narratives; instead, they are reiterated through strategic language choices and visual imagery that align with existing social expectations. As such, the study examines how the illusion of perfection is produced through interrelated linguistic and semiotic practices that frame femininity in commodified terms.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), with particular reliance on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (Fairclough, 1995). The qualitative orientation of this study is rooted in its aim to examine how language and visual semiotics in advertising function ideologically. The objective is not to quantify occurrences but to uncover how discourse contributes to the construction of gendered ideals, consumer subjectivities, and social norms around body image and self-care.

4.1. Selection of Data

Four advertisements—two related to weight-loss products and two to skincare products—were purposively selected for analysis. The selection was guided by three criteria: (i) the advertisement had to target a primarily female audience, (ii) the product needed to be positioned as enhancing physical appearance or health, and (iii) the advertisement had to contain both textual and visual components. Brands included in the sample—Kellogg's Special K, Actifiber, NIVEA, and Spawake—were chosen due to their wide reach in the Indian market and their sustained presence in media campaigns. These advertisements exemplify mainstream beauty and wellness narratives and allow for the investigation of recurring discursive patterns.

4.2. Data Sources

The selected advertisements were sourced from digital platforms such as YouTube, brand websites, and social media channels. These platforms reflect contemporary modes of advertising dissemination and consumption, making them appropriate for discourse analysis. All advertisements were in English or English-Hindi code-mixed formats, consistent with the language practices of urban Indian advertising. The multimodal nature of the data—comprising spoken and written language, visual imagery, branding elements, and music—makes CDA especially suitable, as it allows for the integration of textual and visual modes in analysis.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

Given that the data consists of publicly available advertisements intended for mass dissemination, formal ethical approval was not required. However, due diligence was observed in ensuring that brand materials were used for scholarly critique and not for commercial reproduction. No personal data was involved in the analysis. The critical stance taken in this study adheres to academic conventions of fair use, and brands are analysed as cultural texts rather than legal entities.

5. Analysis

5.1. Selling Slimness as Self-Worth—A CDA of Kellogg's Special K Advertisement

The Kellogg's Special K advertisement (See Fig-1) featuring the bold statement "THE SECRET TO MAINTAINING MY FIGURE? I EAT!" employs a mix of testimonial narrative, promotional cues, and aesthetic elements to endorse a very specific image of femininity—thin, cheerful, and consumer-driven. At first glance, the ad appears to promote health through routine eating. However, when critically examined through Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis, it becomes evident that the text functions ideologically, reinforcing narrow beauty standards and commodifying health.

Fig-1: Kellogg's Special K advertisement featuring Lara Dutta with the tagline "THE SECRET TO MAINTAINING MY FIGURE? I EAT!" promoting a low-fat breakfast as a strategy for weight management.
Source: https://marketingdiarysanchita.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/30511_pop.jpg

At the textual level, the advertisement draws on a narrative style masquerading as personal experience. The use of the first person ("When my friends ask me... I tell them...") personalizes the message, lending it a tone of authenticity. This device—common in advertising—functions as what Fairclough (1995) identifies as the construction of "synthetic personalisation," where the text mimics casual conversation to bridge the distance between brand and consumer. Phrases like "It's true!" and "Try Kellogg's Special K and see if you feel the difference" operate as imperatives that blur the line between advice and command. The assertion that "it's proven" appeals to scientific authority, though it remains unsupported, reflecting what Machin and Mayr (2012) call the use of pseudo-scientific discourse to enhance credibility without substantiating claims.

Visually, the ad complements its linguistic cues through the model's slim figure, posed with confidence and adorned in soft pink and red hues. The model's wide smile conveys a message that thinness equals happiness. The colours—typically associated with femininity—are strategically deployed to appeal to a female demographic, particularly urban, health-conscious women. As Van Dijk (2015) argues, media discourses do not merely reflect social meanings but are part of the practices that shape them. Here, beauty is presented as a consumer outcome, implying that products like Special K are essential to achieving and maintaining the "ideal" female body.

Ideologically, this advertisement contributes to what Eagleton (1991) terms "socially necessary illusions"—ideas that sustain dominant cultural narratives while appearing neutral or even empowering. By emphasizing that "I eat" as a path to slimness, the ad manipulates a seeming contradiction to suggest that disciplined consumption—of the right, branded product—enables indulgence without consequence. This narrative aligns with neoliberal values where health and body maintenance are framed as personal responsibilities, often shifting systemic pressures onto individuals, especially women (Rottenberg, 2018).

Further, the ad ties identity to consumption with the closing phrase "Be Special." This imperative plays on individualism, suggesting that uniqueness and self-worth are attainable through consumer choices. Such messaging reinforces gendered consumer roles, where women are constantly targeted to modify and discipline their bodies in line with aesthetic expectations. Lazar (2017) notes that such discourses reproduce dominant gender ideologies by promoting beauty and body control as routes to empowerment, even while reinforcing patriarchal norms.

5.2. Reading Health Through Commercial Wellness in the Actifiber Ad

The Actifiber advertisement deploys a calculated mixture of scientific rhetoric, cultural symbolism, and gender-targeted visuality to construct weight loss not just as a health concern but as a moral and aesthetic obligation. By foregrounding the phrase "My secret to Healthy Weight Reduction," the ad simulates a testimonial narrative to displace direct product marketing with a more intimate, seemingly trustworthy voice. As observed in the larger

discourse of wellness culture, such strategies aim to align personal identity with consumption patterns, a feature central to the neoliberal commodification of health (Rottenberg, 2018).

Fig-2: Advertisement for ActiFiber featuring a woman endorsing weight loss through "regular homemade food," framing slimness as achievable via natural, disciplined consumption. **Source:** actifiber.com

The phrase "Regular homemade food with Actifiber" is central to the ad's discursive framing. It appeals to a domestic ethos, implying that the product can integrate seamlessly into the everyday lives of homemakers or working women without disrupting cultural food practices. However, this normalisation conceals the ideological assertion that women must manage their weight even within the domestic sphere. The presence of a female model in a red kurta visually reinforces this expectation, connecting femininity, homemaking, and body surveillance.

The scientific-sounding terms—"fiber nutrition," "PREBIOTIC ADVANTAGE," "100% plant origin"—draw on what Machin and Mayr (2012) identify as the linguistic strategy of *scientification*, where the use of specialist terminology provides legitimacy. These terms function as signifiers of credibility, despite the absence of actual scientific citations. The phrase "Product of France" introduces a global marketing strategy that aligns Western origins with higher standards of health and quality, subtly reinforcing Eurocentric biases in wellness advertising. This implies that credibility in health products stems from Western provenance, marginalising local or indigenous food knowledge.

Rather than presenting health as a holistic or socially influenced state, the advertisement isolates weight loss as an individual task achievable through simple consumption. The clean, confident statements omit the complexity of weight regulation, metabolic differences, or socioeconomic dietary constraints. As van Dijk (2015) has argued, discourse structures often obscure systemic inequalities by relocating responsibility onto the individual. The ad's rhetorical simplicity reinforces that health is attainable solely through "good choices," echoing neoliberal narratives where failure to maintain body ideals is framed as personal negligence.

What also stands out in this ad is its visual progression: from the idealised homemaker to the semi-fit woman in exercise clothing. These images serve as aspirational models, reinforcing body hierarchies that suggest a spectrum—where starting from regular home food leads to a "better" version of the self through consumption of Actifiber. Visual representations of the ideal female body create body dissatisfaction among viewers, encouraging internalised comparisons and self-regulation.

There is also a recurring appeal to the "natural." Words like "100% plant origin" and "natural weight control" evoke the moral authority of organic living. These phrases sideline the need for medical or structured interventions, subtly framing diet supplements as preferable alternatives. In doing so, the ad reinforces the binary

of natural vs. artificial, further privileging consumption over care. As Eagleton (1991) has argued, such binaries serve ideological purposes by casting capitalist solutions as inherently moral or superior.

The narrative is therefore clear: health is personal, slimness is natural, and beauty is achievable—if one chooses the right product. The role of the consumer is not to question but to comply, to believe in the product's promises, and to enact health through purchases. The ad operates within and contributes to a broader media culture that ties wellness with individual consumption, marginalising collective, contextual understandings of health and body diversity.

5.3. Soft Skin, Fast Results—Beauty, Science, and the Consumer Promise in the NIVEA Ad

The advertisement for NIVEA Soft Light Moisturizer is a layered text that draws upon emotional appeal, scientific authority, and cultural familiarity to promote a consumable vision of self-care and beauty. The linguistic and visual choices throughout the ad construct skincare not merely as a hygienic or health-related need but as a marker of desirability, modernity, and emotional wellbeing. When viewed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), this advertisement can be seen as contributing to the normalization of beauty standards and the commodification of daily self-care practices.

Fig-3: Advertisement for NIVEA Soft Light Moisturizer featuring actress Taapsee Pannu, combining localized language and scientific claims to promote instant skin freshness and emotional appeal. **Source:** nivea.in.

Beginning with the imperative "Treat your skin," the ad immediately positions skincare as indulgence rather than necessity. This is consistent with broader consumer discourses that frame personal care routines as luxuries which contribute to emotional reward, reinforcing a gendered ideology in which beauty is linked to pleasure, attention, and discipline (Wolf, 2002). The language of the ad, particularly words like "goodness," "instantly," and "refreshes," is crafted to appeal to both emotion and urgency, presenting skincare as a moment of pampering that yields quick results. Such advertisements construct beauty practices as effortless solutions to idealized appearance, masking the more complex socio-cultural pressures that drive consumer habits.

The phrase "morning wali soft & fresh skin" is especially telling in its localized construction. The insertion of "wali," a colloquial Hindi suffix, creates an informal and culturally rooted tone. It also makes the ad relatable to an Indian audience, indicating a marketing shift towards personalization and regional linguistic strategies. However, this localized familiarity simultaneously upholds globalized beauty expectations. In this context, language becomes a dual tool—making the product feel culturally relevant while subtly reinforcing universal ideals about appearance, smoothness, and freshness. As Van Dijk (1998) points out, the control over symbolic resources such as language and images plays a significant role in the reproduction of dominant ideologies.

Claims such as "quick absorbing, non-greasy" and "enriched with the goodness of Vitamin E and jojoba oil" lend a scientific edge to the product, contributing to what Machin and Mayr (2012) describe as the strategy

of "scientification"—where authority is suggested through scientific-sounding language, regardless of actual empirical substantiation. The inclusion of ingredients known for their natural connotations—like jojoba oil—responds to consumer preferences for "clean" or "organic" skincare, a trend increasingly shaped by health-conscious marketing. However, these appeals to nature are not necessarily evidence-based; rather, they function ideologically, promoting the assumption that "natural" equals safe or effective. This uncritical conflation of naturalness and efficacy demonstrates Eagleton's (1991) point that ideologies often operate beneath the level of explicit logic, guiding perceptions through repetition and familiarity.

The visual layout reinforces the linguistic framing. Blue and white dominate the colour palette, signalling hygiene, purity, and hydration. The smiling female model with visibly smooth skin subtly communicates that emotional satisfaction and social confidence are linked to the product's use. Similar to the body ideals communicated in weight-loss advertisements, this representation ties physical appearance to emotional well-being, reinforcing gendered norms that associate women's self-worth with their ability to adhere to aesthetic standards (Wolf, 2002; Lazar, 2017). The presence of water droplets near the moisturizer tub and the highlighting of "soft & fresh" are not just design choices but semiotic cues meant to trigger associations with freshness and effectiveness.

Moreover, the claim that NIVEA is "India's No.1 Trusted Skincare Brand" bolsters the ad's credibility, aligning with Fairclough's (1995) analysis of how texts draw on existing discourses of authority to legitimize themselves. The ₹45/- pricing prominently displayed further appeals to a wide demographic, connecting the promise of beauty and care to affordability and daily access. However, beneath this accessibility lies a recurring assumption: that women must strive for constant bodily upkeep, and that products like NIVEA are the tools through which one can meet that social expectation.

The advertisement constructs a version of self-care that appears harmless and even empowering, but which in reality serves to sustain commercial and cultural standards about ideal femininity. Through a mix of scientific vocabulary, aesthetic imagery, and localized expression, the NIVEA ad masks broader social pressures as personal lifestyle choices. What appears as a simple moisturizer becomes, upon closer inspection, a vehicle for transmitting values around gender, appearance, and consumption.

5.4. Spawake and the Selling of Serenity—Sea, Science, and Skin in a Packaged Promise

The Spawake advertisement for its SEAYURVEDA product line offers a curated narrative that merges traditional healing systems, marine-based science, and aspirational beauty messaging to create an idealized model of skin care. Framed by the tagline "Feel lively with Happy Skin," the advertisement mobilizes emotional, cultural, and scientific signifiers to transform a cosmetic product into a lifestyle necessity. Viewed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), this advertisement illustrates how commercial texts do ideological work by shaping consumer beliefs around beauty, wellness, and identity.

Fig-4: Advertisement for Spawake's SEAYURVEDA skincare range featuring actress Mouni Roy, combining marine-based ingredients and Ayurvedic terminology to promote holistic beauty and calmness through product use. **Source:** spawake.in.

The phrase "INDIA'S FIRST SEAYURVEDA" is especially significant, combining nationalist appeal with commercial novelty. The term blends "sea" and "Ayurveda," connecting the global trend of marine-based skincare with the culturally resonant tradition of Ayurvedic healing. This portmanteau commodifies centuries-old indigenous knowledge and positions it within a global capitalist framework that prioritizes exclusivity and innovation. As Eagleton (1991) notes, ideology often functions through the repackaging of older traditions into newer, marketable forms. Here, Ayurveda is not invoked as a spiritual or holistic philosophy, but as a product enhancement strategy—part of the brand's claim to authenticity and uniqueness.

Linguistically, the ad draws on emotive language: "Feel lively," "Happy Skin," "rejuvenates," "revitalises," and "relax your senses." These choices appeal to the emotional register, creating an affective bond with the product. The repeated emphasis on sensory and emotional benefits reframes skincare from a functional act to a mood-enhancing ritual. Such phrasing reinforces the consumer's association between product use and personal happiness, masking the market logic behind emotional satisfaction. The idea of "Happy Skin" anthropomorphizes the body, suggesting that skincare products are not just beneficial but also necessary for emotional and physical well-being.

Scientific authority is established through the use of botanical-sounding, Latinate ingredient names such as *Laminaria Japonica Extract*, *Kappaphycus Alvarezii Extract*, and *Samudra Lavana*. These signal clinical validation while aligning with global beauty trends that value "science-backed naturals." This strategy, outlined by Machin and Mayr (2012), is part of the broader "scientification" of advertising, where technical terms signal truth regardless of empirical support. The packaging reinforces this through visual emphasis on ingredients and foreign origins. The phrase "Japan Original" adds another layer of transnational credibility, tying product quality to a global beauty standard that privileges Japanese skincare culture.

Visually, the advertisement presents a fair-skinned, serene woman dressed in soft satin with closed eyes—an image coded with peace, satisfaction, and inner calm. Her fair complexion reinforces a deeply embedded cultural bias toward lighter skin tones, a recurring theme in South Asian advertising. As Wolf (2002) argues, such visual tropes contribute to a narrow definition of beauty where fair skin becomes a symbol of self-worth, social capital, and desirability. This visual pairing with the textual promise of "hydrated," "glowing," and "rejuvenated" skin implies that these ideals are attainable through consumption, reinforcing what Van Dijk (1998) describes as the socio-cognitive entrenchment of ideological norms.

The setting—a soft wooden surface and ocean-blue background—adds to the product's naturalist aesthetic. The elements of water, sea salt, and wood work together semiotically to connote purity, calm, and organic value. The aesthetic arrangement of the packaging—rose gold, brown, and minimalist—further signals luxury, sophistication, and modernity. These design elements suggest that consumption of the product is not just about beauty but about aligning oneself with an elevated lifestyle.

However, beneath this carefully constructed appeal lies an ideological framework that ties beauty, health, and emotional well-being to market participation. The ad reaffirms the expectation that women must constantly strive to perfect their bodies and appearances, not just for health, but for happiness and self-worth. By associating soft, flawless skin with success and positivity, it subtly promotes a consumerist path to self-fulfilment—beauty as a commodity, attainable only through continuous investment in the right products.

This is reflective of what Rottenberg (2018) characterises as the neoliberal turn in wellness, where individual self-care becomes a moral obligation. Spawake's ad appeals to those who are health-conscious, image-aware, and aspirational, offering them a 'solution' in the form of a hybrid product that is ancient, natural, scientific, and cosmopolitan—all at once. While this strategy appeals to consumer values, it also shifts attention away from broader social issues—such as colourism or unrealistic beauty standards—by personalising and aestheticising the act of self-maintenance.

6. Discussion

The analysis of the four selected advertisements—Kellogg's Special K, Actifiber, NIVEA, and Spawake—reveals how linguistic and visual strategies work together to promote narrow ideals of beauty and health. These advertisements are not neutral; rather, they actively produce and reinforce ideologies that align with neoliberal values, where self-care and body management are framed as individual responsibilities (Rottenberg, 2018; Fairclough, 1995). The use of pseudo-scientific terminology and testimonial narratives, as seen in the Kellogg's and Actifiber ads, constructs consumer trust through a combination of emotional appeal and claims to authority (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This strategy gives legitimacy to unverified messages while masking their commercial intent.

The recurring theme of personal responsibility for physical appearance, particularly for women, is presented in these advertisements as empowerment, though it operates within patriarchal and capitalist logics (Lazar, 2017; Wolf, 2002). As Eagleton (1991) argues, ideology often manifests as "socially necessary illusions," making the promotion of slimness or flawless skin appear as lifestyle choices rather than responses to social pressure. This illusion is further strengthened through synthetic personalization (Fairclough, 1995), where first-person narratives simulate intimacy and authenticity, as seen in the Kellogg's ad.

Cultural and linguistic localization, especially in the NIVEA and Spawake advertisements, shows how global beauty norms are adapted to resonate with Indian consumers. Terms like "morning wali skin" and hybrid constructs like "SEAYURVEDA" reflect a calculated blending of local cultural references with global marketing trends, thereby sustaining Eurocentric and fair-skin preferences under the guise of tradition and modernity (Parameswaran, 2004; Van Dijk, 1998).

The repeated emphasis on individual choice—"Be Special," "Treat your skin," or "Feel lively"—echoes broader neoliberal discourses that shift accountability for beauty and health outcomes onto consumers, ignoring structural inequalities related to gender, class, or access (Van Dijk, 2015). These messages construct a reality where self-worth is linked to consumption and bodily discipline, contributing to internalized surveillance and dissatisfaction, especially among women (Gill, 2007; Huang, Peng, & Ahn, 2021).

7. Conclusion

This study has examined how weight-loss and skincare advertisements construct and reinforce gendered beauty ideals through carefully orchestrated linguistic and visual strategies. Applying Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis model to four selected advertisements—Kellogg's Special K, Actifiber, NIVEA, and Spawake—the research has uncovered the mechanisms through which media discourses contribute to the normalization of narrow and often exclusionary standards of femininity. Across all four advertisements, thinness, fairness, and youthfulness are framed not just as aesthetic preferences but as indicators of moral virtue, discipline, and individual worth.

The analysis reveals that testimonial-style messaging, pseudo-scientific terminology, culturally resonant phrases, and emotionally charged visuals are deployed to naturalize consumerism as self-care. Whether through Kellogg's framing of "eating" as a secret to slimness, Actifiber's fusion of domesticity and scientific rhetoric, NIVEA's emphasis on fast results and product-based happiness, or Spawake's blend of Ayurveda and marine aesthetics, these ads operate ideologically. They invite women to see consumption as both a personal solution and a social expectation. This reflects what Eagleton (1991) calls "socially necessary illusions"—discourses that appear empowering but serve to reinforce existing power hierarchies and cultural standards.

One of the key findings of the study is the consistency with which health, beauty, and moral value are interlinked and marketed as attainable through disciplined, product-based consumption. The language of the ads consistently promotes the illusion of effortless perfection, obscuring the socio-cultural pressures and economic interests behind these narratives. As Van Dijk (2015) notes, the power of such discourses lies in their ability to shape collective cognition and reinforce social hierarchies while appearing neutral or even benevolent.

Future research can build on these findings by expanding the dataset to include advertisements that claim inclusivity or challenge traditional beauty norms, such as campaigns featuring diverse body types or skin tones. It would also be valuable to examine how male-targeted wellness ads replicate or disrupt similar ideological patterns. Additionally, investigating consumer responses through audience reception studies could offer insight into how these discourses are internalized, negotiated, or resisted by viewers. This line of inquiry can further contribute to critical media literacy and deepen our understanding of the intersection between gender, language, and consumer culture in contemporary media.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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