

Critical Analysis of Women's Representation in TV Advertisements from a Cultural Studies Perspective

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Abstract Through the interpretation of texts, and subsequent creation of social reality, mediated representations are often seen to be presented within the certain of ideological discourses that reflect the existing power structures. The main objective of this paper is to analyze television commercials with an emphasis on gender roles to decode the main elements of a dominant discourse (preferred readings) and representation mechanisms; and the elements' relationships with ideology, hegemony and power relations in reproducing a dominant discourse.

Grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of cultural studies and critical studies perspectives, the two-layer analysis is used in this paper – a semiotic and critical discourse analysis of television commercials with an emphasize on gender roles and ideology. The results demonstrate that the TV advertisements selected in this paper represent dominant gender relations and reproduce traditional values. Furthermore, these representations illustrate a contradiction between society and media in gender roles.

Keywords TV advertisements. Representation of women. Gender roles. Critical discourse analysis. Ideology.

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Introduction

The research is placed within the cultural studies perspective that assumes an intertwined relationship between the production and reproduction of symbolic meanings and actualized meanings. From a cultural studies perspective, the study of women's representation in mainstream television advertisements with emphasize on gender roles is embraced.

Media has an important role in representation of different groups in a society, but television, as the most popular medium, plays a significant role in representing and shaping attitudes. Advertising, as one of the television genres, is a prominent discourse type in virtually all contemporary societies (Cook, 2005). In addition to information regarding services and products, it constructs a secondary discourse about society and power relations. Gender relations are one of the secondary discourses that advertisements construct. The image of woman and man in media, particularly in television, is essential for the understanding of social practices, social interactions and ideology. Therefore, advertising has an important role in the representation of gender in a society.

Advertising, as a powerful force, often reflects and enhances the social ideologies that it selectively endorses. At the same time, advertising is a cultural environment challenged by ideological discourses in the society and is constantly evolving in response to the shifting power relations between social groups. In addition, advertising considered as a cultural form and discourse is a site in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or challenge, to confirm, negotiate or displace definitions and identities" (Gledhill, 1988, p. 72). On the other hand, representations are directly associated with collective meanings, power relations, status hierarchies, resistance, alliances or conflicts that may exist in the public sphere. Thus, it is a common belief among scholars that the representation of gender relations actually reflects the social, cultural, political and economic values of the society (Dines & Humez, 1994; Gauntlett, 2002).

Recent studies in relevant literature have illustrated that the present systems of mass communication express to a considerable extent gender representations of the dominant

patriarchal ideology (Brunsdon, 2000; Shattuc, 1997). Accordingly, television programs mirror dominant gender relations and patriarchal values that still remain in post-modern societies (Van Dijk, 1993). Representation of women in the media, especially television, is an important issue in social communication and cultural studies, since media has an important role in communities. Media typically carries dominant values, cultural elements, and dominant ideology in any society. In Iran, despite changes in the representation of women in television, dominant discourse in advertising is evident, thus challenging the dominant regimes of representation should be considered.

Utilizing a critical approach, the mainstream television commercials represent women and gender roles is going to be investigated. This study also aims to explore the intersections of gender and ideology that are embedded in television advertising.

Research Approach

Cultural studies have linked communication, consumption and cultural transformation to identity through the analysis of both media texts and living experiences (Muhammad, 2003). In terms of method, the cultural studies perspective raises questions that emphasize qualitative and interdisciplinary modes of investigation. In this paper, critical discourse analysis is used as a linguistic tool in cultural studies. According to the purpose of this study, the following research questions serve as the guidelines for analyzing the advertisements:

- How are women represented in television commercials?
- What are the common mechanisms in presenting female characters in television commercials?
- How do television commercials conceptualize women in relation to the dominant male culture and for what reason?
- What are the socio-cultural mechanisms and ideologies that play a role in shaping these representations?
- How does the dominant discourse become naturalized in television commercials?

To answer these research questions, a qualitative analysis method is used. A major criticism against quantitative research on the evaluation of gender roles focuses on this aspect that statistical content analysis usually describe the visual elements of audiovisuals, easily recognizable and clearly measurable factors but do not provide an in-depth reasoning about the hidden ideologies and the social interaction of the production procedures (Norenee, 1977). Furthermore, quantitative analyses usually do not investigate advertising as an intermediary system between economy, culture and society (Pazarzi & Tsangaris, 2008). In this respect, a qualitative study is conducted – a textual analysis that studies all the elements in which femininity is conceived, constructed and projected in society through three TV commercials.

Textual analysis has been widely used within the cultural studies to uncover the preferred meanings encoded in a text. Specifically, this textual analysis is intended to show how ideology and meanings are accepted and conceptualized by TV commercials to define a woman (or man) in mediated culture.

This is especially true in the analysis of TV advertising because textual analysis often deals with a relative smaller number of texts, but seeks to get into the beneath of the surface, the denotative meanings, to examine more implicit, connotative, and symbolic meanings, through the researcher's interpretation rather than systematic measuring. By uncovering the connotative meanings and the deeper social and marketing ideologies shaping these images and messages, one can reach to this understanding of how women are being represented and gender roles constructed and ideology enacted in advertisement. The critical discourse analysis not only concentrates on visual issues and constructing meanings, but it also focuses on the question of how these meanings reflect or support the dominant patriarchal ideology and naturalization of dominant discourse in the society.

As mentioned earlier, commercial advertisements are cultural phenomena in the society. Different methods are used to study cultural phenomena, but cultural studies

like other qualitative forms of sociological inquiry, inevitably emphasize on "circle of meaning" which is inspired by Derrida (1979) and Laclau and Moufee (1985). For these thinkers, nothing exists outside of discourse; and race, gender, nationality and class are discursive. Consequently, "semiotic approach cannot explore their strategies. In semiotic approach, representation was understood on the basis of the ways words functioned as signs within language, but in a culture, meaning often depends on longer units of analysis – narratives, statements, group of images, the whole discourses which have acquired widespread authority. Therefore "semiotics seemed to confine the processes of representation to the language and to treat it as a closed, rather static system" (Hall, 2003, p. 42). It is the fundamental basic of development from semiotics to metatextual analysis. Subsequent developments became more concerned with representation as a source of production of social knowledge and power relation that led to critical discourse analysis and its different approaches.

Considering the main vocabulary and purpose of critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2003) and the formations of cultural studies (Barker, 2003), it can be concluded that gender and representation are the main areas of critical discourse analysis and cultural studies. In other words, they are the shared subject of many researches in these fields. Since approaches of critical discourse analysis are complicated and numerous, and cultural fields also involve a vast part of the community, explaining the interaction between methods of discourse analysis and cultural studies in a brief article like this is not possible. Therefore, the focus is going to be on a certain approach of critical discourse analysis to achieve a clear and perfect vision of cultural phenomena.

As mentioned above, the analysis of representation should go beyond the semiotic approach to provide a more complete analysis. The analysis of gender representation has to go beyond semiotics approach and utilize a discourse approach. Laclau and Mufee's (1985) approach is the appropriate theoretical framework of analyzing text for the whole discourses embedded in advertising about gender roles and its discourses.

Explanation of the theoretical principles of Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theory and utilizing it as the method of analysis is not impossible here. This theory is primarily based on Foucauldian interpretation and manifesto of macro semantic system. It helps researchers to identify discursive distinction and antagonism among discourses and floating signifiers to determine what discourses they produce and which discourses are highlighted or marginalized. Questions like whether it also demonstrates the interaction of them over the definition of signifiers, or how television advertisements, according to this theory, reinforce and reproduce the dominant discourse and dominant patriarchal system.

Hence, the two-layer analysis is used in this paper – a semiotics and critical discourse analysis of television commercials. Grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of cultural studies and critical studies perspectives, the present research can contribute to the current understanding of how TV commercials represent women and how the dominant male discourse becomes naturalized.

The common advertising strategies targeting gender roles are examined to illuminate how gender roles are encoded in TV advertising texts, how woman is defined through consumption ideologies, and how advertising constructs subjective positions. Therefore, a detailed analysis of advertising representations of women and the preferred meanings in advertising are presented.

Sampling

The main sampling method in this paper is purposive sampling, the most common sampling method in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). The purposive sampling approach is used when samples are chosen because they have particular features of characteristics that will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central questions that the researcher intends to study (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). For the purpose of this paper, only three television commercials from Iranian TV's Channel 3 are selected and analyzed because this channel is more popular than other channels broadcasted in Iran by IRIB. They were selected in prime time in the autumn of 2007

(10 September-21 October). In fact, the 3 advertisements were selected in such a way as to have significations in gender roles. Also, they can be considered as open texts in comparison with other advertisements in this case. Undoubtedly, the courses of advertising are complicated and not completely coherent. Just from the examples mentioned, one can understand how Iranian television represents woman and gender roles in advertising.

Analysis of Advertisements

The semiotic analysis of each audiovisual text concentrates on visual issues concerning the way advertisers construct the intended messages, while critical discourse analysis approach concentrates on the question of how those meanings reflect or support the dominant patriarchal ideology, articulation of the portrayal of women and men, and naturalization of dominant discourse. Shot are used as the unit of analysis in the narration of advertisements.

Advertisement 1: *Haleh Softener (Tolipers)*

"Oh, she has forgotten, let me knock the door once. All clothes need softener in each washing. Please do not forget *Haleh* softener, *Tolipers* is the sign of cleaning", the voice of a man is heard while we see a woman in the kitchen.



It shows the inside of a washing machine whose door the young woman will then close. The young woman is thinking, signifying that she has forgotten something and is

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trying to remember. Men's and boys' shirts knock on the glass from inside the washing machine. Then a close-up of the liquid softener is seen in the hands of the young woman who wants to add it to the washing machine. She is very happy now.

Analysis of Advertisement 1

The first analyzed advertisement promoted a household cleaner used with the washing machine. It is a consumer good, but nothing is mentioned about the qualities of the product. The action takes place in a house (kitchen) and the central character is a young woman in her thirties.

The ideological analysis of the text indicates that this commercial reflects the traditional beliefs concerning a woman's domestic position in contrast to all the progressive changes in the Iranian society.

In this advertisement, a woman is portrayed to be responsible for washing the clothes of family members, considered as one of the main housework tasks. Although the meaning of the message is presented as a norm, which seems 'transparent' and neutral, in fact the pictures are unrealistic and stereotypic, based on older patriarchal models and values. The dominant discourse creates a gender identity for women and they have to use tools and goods accordingly. A device such as the washing machine and goods like *Haleh* softener has been considered as devices and goods for women. Representation of men in this advertisement is in the contrast with the dominant discourse. The male identity doesn't accept this housework task to belong to men. In fact, the use of goods and equipment is part of women and their essence, and cannot involve applied meaning without woman and vice versa. Presenting the woman as a housewife, actually rejects the other meanings, and insists on the projection of the traditional female role imprisoned in the domestic environment.

From another point of view, notifying and reminding the woman is the duty of men. Is there a man in this advertisement that plays such a role? Men are physically absent in this advertisement, but through the objects (male shirts plus the male voice), father and son are present in the discourse of this advertisement to indicate that they are

responsible for notifying the woman using personification. The young woman, according to the advertisers, is the 'preferred reading' of the dominant discourse and placing women in this situation is very natural and ordinary.

The advertisement uses the typical sexual attraction tool for the consumers' persuasion. The illustration of images of young models in submissive positions, acting as erotic and provocative creatures, is the strategy of marketing.

Therefore, the discursive order of this advertisement, by creating chain of equivalence, blocks other meanings about female gender roles. Through such action, it causes the hegemony of patriarchal discourse.

Advertisement 2: *Apollon Samovar*

The second TV commercial promotes home appliances by the name of *apollon samovar*. A relatively obese man is standing in front of the kitchen and his wife is drinking tea in the kitchen (the obese man's appearance, gesture and laughter promote humor). While the man says "What a great *apollon samovar*", he offers tea to his wife. In this scene, the woman is near the *samovar*. Finally, it shows various kinds of *apollon samovars* in different kitchens. The action takes place at home and the central character is the obese man.



1



2



3

Analysis of Advertisement 2

In this advertisement, one of the assumptions of patriarchal division of labor is apparently defamiliarized, making tea at home is traditionally of feminine nature, but in

this advertisement, along with modernization of the interior of the house, the task apparently belongs to the male polarity. Therefore, it tries to marginalize the tradition and set the agenda of modernity, as women usually bring tea to their husbands at home in the context of the Iranian society. On the other hand, showing the women in the kitchen and besides the *apollon samovar* is traditional because portraying women in the kitchen is stereotypical. Therefore, within this modernity, an implicit traditionalism is also present while the woman is marginalized in the dominant discourse of this advertisement.

In fact, the discourse of this advertisement refers implicitly to the role of women to men (making and bringing tea) by employing tradition and promoting humor

by selecting a humorous gesture and language for the obese man. This act is gender division of labor and is inherently feminine. If the man does it, it is just comical. In other words, unlike women, men do not pay serious attention to housework and it is mainly funny for them to do the housework.

Language and humorous gesture signify a gap between the real world and the world of signs. Undoubtedly, one of the concepts covers this distance is ideology. Signs in determining reality have an ideological function; deconstruction and challenging signs reveal who has the superior position and who has been repressed or has a lower position. The discourse of this advertisement limits the role of women to the limited space of kitchen and disregards other role takings by of women.

This Advertisement has another signification that relates to the concept of "silence". In this advertisement, domination of patriarchal discourse leads the woman to become silent and inactive. In fact, woman in this advertisement is being considered equivalent to "silence" and man obtains his identity through this silence in the chain of equivalence. This identity is contradictory to the modernity discourse of this advertisement.

Using synecdoche (the voice of a man and his gesture for pointing to the quality of the product), man is also being equivalent to supervision, approval, tact and wisdom.

Hence, man is highlighted. The dominant traditionalist discourse of this advertisement shapes its identity based on “antagonism” with the discourse of modernity and conflict between tradition and modernity. In other words, traditional discourse excludes modernity by deconstructing a nodal point and then becomes hegemonic and highlighted. Thus, this discourse makes a hegemonic nodal point of traditional discourse with stabilizing signifiers of power, tact, wisdom and supervision; and simultaneously separates the nodal points of the antagonist from its signified points and marginalizes them. The result is the deconstruction of an antagonist discourse that is a feminine discourse. So, through this process and by employing tools of agenda setting, marginalization, exclusion and consensus production, it naturalizes its hegemony, deconstructs the antagonist, and displays it with respect to common sense and hides the face of power from views.

Advertisement 3: *Atragin* Child's Foot Cream

The third TV commercial considered in this paper promotes child's foot cream, and no other information is given about the product except the following: “My darling brother was crying all night. Mom came to him, took some cream and rubbed it on his legs. He immediately became calm. Now, my small brother is having good dreams. Child's foot cream is always perfumed; it is nice and colorful like flowers, everywhere is *Atragin* (the word '*Atragin*' means perfumed in Persian)”, the girl in the commercial narrates.



1



2



3

In the first shot, a girl is shown worried in her bedroom and in the second shot, a baby boy is crying. Their mother comes to the baby's bedroom and rubs some cream on his legs and the baby boy goes to a deep sleep.



4

5

6

In the fourth shot, the girl is watching her mother's work and in the next shot, the small baby is holding the cream tube smiling. Finally, different forms of the product are seen beside some flowers.

Analysis of Advertisement 3

The advertisement begins with the concern of a small girl in a bedroom. What is the reason of her concern? Is she hungry? Is she alone? Is she frightened? Her concerns are the pain and cry of her little brother and she unsuccessfully tries to find a solution to his problem. Now, the mother comes in and immediately solves the problem and relieves his pain (taking care of a child is a mother's duty) and the girl learns this action from her mother. So what is the role of the girl in this advertisement? Is it possible that a boy was used instead of the girl? The answer to this question is negative because the presence of a boy (with male gender roles) instead of a girl in Iranian culture seems contradictory and it is adversative of the dominant discourse. Actions such as taking care of children in the context of Iranian society relate to women and male identity refuses to accept this action. According to the dominant cultural discourse of society and the social context of Iran, girls should attend beside their mothers, follow their

footsteps at home from early childhood, and learn the methods of housekeeping and taking care of children through imitating them.

In this advertisement, the act of the girl in imitating her mother's work while belonging to the female polarity implies that she should play her traditional future role. These acts make naturalization of gender division of labor and allocate the role of taking care of children to the female polarity. According to patriarchal assumptions, girls tend to learn ways of taking care of children from their mothers due to their feminine nurturing childhood. Her presence at her mother's work is the sign of exact observation for identification of the girl with her mother, a picture of the natural imitation of a girl from her mother during the period of childhood. This is the position that the discourse offers girls to take for shaping their identity.

So the discourse of this advertisement tries temporarily to reduce the meanings of gender roles to some fixed and special meanings (homemaker, emotional and concerned about children). These meanings indicate that they are part of the female nature and are therefore unchangeable. Thus, it leads to the formation and continuation of female identity. Such conditions help the stabilization of the superiority of male position and the low position of women, and it is based on maintaining the existing gender relations. However, the dominant patriarchal discourse establishes a closure and stabilizes the instability of signs. These meanings become normalized and common so that we assume them as natural. In fact, representation of a girl and a mother, respectively, is an attempt to reproduce the desirable and good woman or 'preferred reading' of dominant discourse at present and in the future era.

Conclusion

The two-method analysis presented in this paper – first a semiotics and then critical discourse analysis of gender – asked some questions regarding mainstream television advertisements concerning how gender roles are constructed in advertisements and how they shape the dominant male ideology and become naturalized and hegemonic in

society. This article has not claimed generalization but its aim is a deep analysis of cultural phenomena.

It is observed from textual analysis that the selected advertisements concentrate on tradition and expand dominant ideology through various mechanisms. One of the mechanisms is constructing male and female identity and, more importantly, eliminating the distinction between sex and gender within the dominant discourse of patriarchal culture to allocate specific tasks and certain behaviors to feminine or masculine nature.

Advertisements analyzed in this study place the frequently social dominant discourse (patriarchal) against female discourse through identified discourses and discursive antagonism; and in this way, highlight the social dominant discourse (patriarchal) and marginalize the other discourse (feminine). Hence, they shape attitudes to male and female genres so that the power of this discourse becomes naturalized according to common sense. Thus, it serves the naturalization of the dominant discourse's belief that is patriarchal. In these advertisements, agenda setting and marginalization are ways for maintaining and continuing power within discourses. Masculine discourse highlights men's strengths and creates a polarity between tradition and modernity to stabilize signifiers of the masculine discourse; and articulates them around the central signifier "men" and makes it hegemonic.

Now based on the analysis, I classify central category of dominant discourse and representational mechanism is classified, and generally, they will include the following:

- Men as superior signifiers, and equivalent to power, logic, management, tact and wisdom in comparison to the attitude of women with signifiers such as passivity, dependent and emotional in chain of equivalence;
 - Naturalization in division of patriarchal division of labor;
 - Evaluating the status of women versus men;
 - Identification of girls and boys with mothers and fathers respectively, and reproducing the dominant discourse on gender division of labor;

- Defamiliarization of gender division of labor, with the language of humor and non-verbal communication, to produce dominant discourse;
- Frequent representation of desirable character or 'preferred reading' of dominant discourse in different ways to represent and reproduce the dominant discourse.

In fact, dominant discourses of these advertisements indirectly raise values that reinforce traditional system of gender roles. The Islamic Republic of Iran opens up the opportunities for women to participate in different modern arenas and in recent years, the number of women in different discourses has increased. They have a visible presence in the public arena as sales women, businesswomen, politicians, police officers, drivers, professors, members of parliament, technicians, and ministers. Despite all these changes in Iran's society, advertisements mainly represent gender roles of women in a traditional fashion. Therefore, there are contradictions between television advertisements and society. Consequently, the media, and television in particular, should present the real status and role of women along with an evolution of gender roles in the society.

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