

The hide of a rhinoceros or soft as a baby's bottom? Ecology and the language of cosmetic advertisements

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Introduction

Women today are under enormous pressure not just to look beautiful but to look younger. We are bombarded with advertisements in magazines and on television to make us buy beauty products which claim to remove our wrinkles and rejuvenate our skin. The advertisements nearly always include a picture of a famous model, who, although not in the first flush of youth, does not have a wrinkle in sight. The implication being, that if we buy the particular product, we too can look like Penelope Cruz, Claudia Schiffer, Linda Evangelista, or Catherine Zeta-Jones etc. Are we so naïve? Probably, but also optimistic that we can make ourselves look better. As a fifty-five year old with a beautiful twenty-two year old daughter I know what it is like to see ones' self slowly ageing and to realise that you will never have the youthful skin of a twenty-two year old again. It makes us feel vulnerable and it is this vulnerability that the beauty companies are tapping into.

‘One thing is for sure: all civilisations have looked for the fountain of youth and tried to reverse the effects of ageing. Modern Western civilisation has gone one step further by making it an unacceptable part of the human condition to look old.’¹

Everyone wants to look their best and so the beauty companies cannot lose. Each product that comes onto the market promising yet more fantastic claims, women will buy. We do not in our heart of hearts, believe all the claims of the advertisement, but even if the product makes a little bit of difference, it makes us feel better. Also, if we do not try the product, we may be missing out on looking younger. It is a win-win situation for the beauty companies.

In this article I will be looking at how language in cosmetic advertisements, particularly anti-ageing ones, potentially makes women insecure and dissatisfied with their looks so that they buy more and more products which not only harm the environment but may also be damaging their own health.

Analysis

I looked at advertisements in four magazines for January 2008: Good Housekeeping, Woman and Home, Red and Elle. The average age of women who read the first two magazines is forty- seven, whereas Red and Elle appeal to a thirty something readership.² There were fewer advertisements for anti-ageing products in Elle than in

¹ Andrew Moore, ‘The Bio-chemistry of Beauty, *EMBO Rep*, 15 Aug. 2002; 3 (8) 714-717.

<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi> [accessed 3 Jan. 2008]

² www.magforum.com, [accessed 3 Jan. 2008]

the other magazines. Elle focussed more on general beauty products and perfume, though anti-ageing products were still to be found. This seems to indicate that the beauty companies target particular anti-ageing products for particular age ranges, i.e. the younger you are, you use products to stop the first wrinkle appearing, the older you are you use products to help reduce the wrinkles you have got already and to prevent new ones appearing. The beauty company Olay have regularly targeted young women as well as old, telling them if they start now, years before even a whisper of a wrinkle will appear on their peachy smooth skin, they will benefit later. I will now list a selection of some of the advertisements that I found in the magazines and comment on the language.

Good Housekeeping magazine, January 2008

OLAY

Regenerist daily regenerating serum

Look younger without any drama. For most modern women, looking younger is a constant quest -. Isn't it time you gave the surgeon the slip and opted for Olay Regenerist instead? Regenerist combines its pentapeptide with the skin-smoothing and strengthening capacities of niacinamide – so skin looks visibly younger and smoother. Olay Regenerist and its pentapeptide formula is already the worst-kept beauty secret of millions of women – 2 bottles of Serum are sold every minute in the UK alone. Love the skin you're in.

This advertisement implies that if we are not trying to look younger we are not modern, and therefore, old fashioned. Note the imperative 'look younger'. Encouraging us to 'give the surgeon the slip and opt for Olay' only gives us two options and makes us feel that unless we use Olay we are not doing the best for ourselves. To stay as we are is unacceptable. We are blinded with science with words like 'pentapeptide' and 'niacinamide'. For all we know about science they could be made-up, but they are a feature of all the beauty product advertisements. 'Regenerist' is the first of the 're-' words to be used in all the advertisements. These words are constantly pointing us back to youth and saying it is better to recreate youth rather than accept how we look. By using 're' we are made to think of beginning again with a new skin. By cleverly telling us that 2 bottles of serum are sold every minute we feel that we must rush out to buy it too. Insecurity is subtly implanted by telling us that if we buy this product we will 'love the skin you're in'. Why are we not allowed to be happy with the way we are?

ELIZABETH ARDEN

NEW

(picture of Catherine Zeta-Jones)

Ceramide Gold Ultra Restorative Capsules

Pure, potent, intensive. These new single dose capsules are worth their weight in gold. Our exclusive CLX Complex delivers the restorative power of Ceramides and essential lipids to help strengthen skin's barrier against the visible signs of time. Supports skin's own natural collagen for a firmer outlook. Takes the focus off lines and wrinkles to maximise smoother, even toned, younger looking skin.

By using an adjective like 'pure', the reader is being manipulated into thinking that the product is made of natural ingredients. We do not actually know what the ingredients are other than that it is 'Ceramide', whatever that is. A sense of confusion is created which makes us feel vulnerable because of the mix of the natural and the

scientific. The words ‘restorative’, ‘younger’ and ‘smoother’ are cleverly used to make us think we will have beautifully smooth skin, but, of course, we don’t know to what extent.

GARNIER

NEW ULTRALIFT Deep Wrinkle A (specially selected ginger captured in
TARGET EVEN DEEP WRINKLES its purest form)

You may not feel your age. But wrinkles can tell a different story. It’s time to target your A-Zone. New UltraLift Deep Wrinkle A, with pure extract of ginger and Vitamin A, is a targeted anti-wrinkle cream.

Of course, we can’t do the impossible and achieve a permanent lift, but Garnier UltraLift Deep Wrinkle A has been scientifically proven by independent experts to reduce the appearance of wrinkles, and leave skin feeling noticeably firmer.

TAKE CARE. GARNIER

This advertisement makes us think we are using a natural product because of ‘extract of ginger’ and there is even a picture of root ginger. Of course, we don’t know how much ginger is being used with the other ingredients, or indeed, why ginger is good for combating wrinkles. Again, there is confusion between what is natural and what is artificial. We are told to ‘take care’ at the end, which suggests that if we don’t use this product, we are not looking after ourselves.

LANCOME

ABSOLUE ULTIMATE BX

Replenish – Radiance – Anti-Brown spot

Absolute Ultimate β X serum is enriched with our highest concentration of Pro-Xylane. Combined with a bio-network of wild yam, soy, sea algae and barley, this serum helps the skin to regain a look of vitality and firmness; deeply replenished with moisture, the skin’s barrier function is reinforced. Reveal skin that looks visibly younger: wrinkles appear reduced, skin feels denser to the touch and your complexion looks more even and luminous

LIFE BEGINS AR 50

Deeply replenish the skin, visibly reduce the appearance of brown spots.

Again the reader is blinded with science. What is ‘pro-xylane’ and β X serum? This time we are told that natural ingredients like wild yam, soy, sea algae and barley are used as well, to allay our fears as to what really might be in the serum. So again we are being manipulated by confusing us because of the blurring of natural and artificial ingredients. By mentioning ‘brown spots’, which are associated with old age, we are made to feel insecure and we must buy this product to look younger.

Woman and Home Magazine, January 2008

DIOR (Picture of Sharon Stone)

CAPTURE TOTALE

The secret of eternal youth?

The latest scientific breakthrough against time, signed by Dior: Capture Totale Day Crème, Eye Treatment and Eye Patch, enriched with the bio-technological extract Centuline, help preserve the skin’s beauty and vitality.

More beautiful today than you were at 20.

This advertisement uses yet more scientific words to impress us. Suggesting that we would want ‘eternal youth’ is a worrying notion. Why would any woman want to look young forever – a very scary concept? The statement ‘more beautiful today than you were at 20’ is a very clever use of words as it implies that we can be more beautiful without actually saying we will be, and therefore protecting the advertiser from possible law-suits.

(The advertisements listed under Good Housekeeping were also to be found in Woman and Home.)

RED Magazine, January 2008

L’OREAL (picture of Claudia Schiffer)

NEW COLLAGEN SKIN RE_MODELLE

Redefining Moisturiser for face and neck

Collagen Skin Re-Modeller infuses the skin with moisture to plump up and help define the skin’s surface, making it look smoother and younger.

FROM AGE 30, TARGETED ANTI-AGEING ACTION WITH SPF15
BECAUSE YOU’RE WORTH IT

This is a very clever advert, because not only does it show a picture of a beautiful Claudia Schiffer, but it also uses adjectives like ‘plump’, ‘smoother’ and ‘younger’ to entice the reader, by flattery, into buying the product and then tells her that she deserves it because ‘you’re worth it’.

LANCOME

RENERGIE MORPHOLIFT R.A.R.E. Firming – Anti-Wrinkle – SPF15

Be amazed by our exclusive technology

Enriched with a unique sequence of amino acids, Renergie Morpholift R.A.R.E. SPF15 helps protect, hydrate and rejuvenate the feel of the skin’s surface. Immediately, the skin’s surface feels tightened and appears firmer. Plumped with moisture, wrinkles appear visibly reduced so skin contours look more defined.

Again, the use of long scientific words as well as ‘hydrate’ and ‘plumped’ to make the reader feel that her old, dried up sagging skin can be ‘rejuvenated’ with this product. Cleverly, negative words are not used in the advertisement to describe our current skin – this is left unsaid. Language is taken a step further by introducing acronyms of which we have no comprehension, showing us that this is a complex product, which our little brains do not need to understand.

ELLE Magazine, January 2008

ELIZABETH ARDEN (picture of Catherine Zeta-Jones)

NEW INTERVENE EYE

New Intervene Eye delivers the science of Biodormin technology. Extracting its key ingredients from the Narcissus flower bulb during the stage of dormancy to:

-Help minimize the appearance of fine lines and dark circles.

-Noticeably firm and smooth the look of skin.

You’ll see a difference: eyes stay smoother, brighter, younger looking longer.

I think it is ironic that this advertisement uses the ingredients of the narcissus flower bulb in its product – Narcissus being the young boy who fell in love with his own reflection in a pond, and eventually died because he realised that he could only love himself.³ To be narcissistic is a very negative value, but presumably we are being told to love ourselves by using this product. Again, this advertisement seems designed to make the reader feel inferior and insecure, and only by buying this product will she have smoother, brighter skin.

L'OREAL

DERMA GENESIS

New Cellular-Nurturing Moisturiser Pro-Xylane, Hyaluronic Acid and SPF15

Gives skin a dewy glow. Skin feels tautened. Plumps up the skin.

BECAUSE YOU'RE WORTH IT

Again, the statement at the end is very clever marketing, and is used in all L'Oreal advertisements, to make the reader feel that the only way to feel valued and special is to buy this product.

In summing up these advertisements it is obvious that the dominant discourse is with youth. Words with the prefix 're' are often used, for example: reduce, replenish, reveal, rejuvenate, to emphasise looking younger. Scientific terminology is in every advertisement but often with mention of plants and natural products, which is ironic because it is artificial products, which are being used to make us look younger and more natural!

Relation to Ecology

Many of the products we put on our skins are bad for the environment. Some of them, when washed off, take a long time to disperse in the waste water system and end up in rivers and streams, thus poisoning fish and plant life. Lots of anti-ageing advertisements have free samples attached to them in plastic-type packaging, the production of which, in factories, causes carbon emissions which is bad for the environment. Disposing of this plastic is also a problem and probably ends up in landfill sites. Having succumbed to the advertisement and bought the product, it is nearly always in elaborate packaging, consisting of several layers (which again have to be produced in factories, causing more carbon emissions). These have to be disposed of, causing more problems for the ecosystems. Beauty products, at present, are not seen as being particularly damaging to the environment, or to health, although gradually voices are being heard and there are people with allergies to products who will probably eventually effect change. These products which are shown to be natural are, in fact, far from it, and cause a lot of damage to the environment. Also, the advertisements contribute to general dissatisfaction and hence consumerism, since many fashion accessories promise to make up for a lack of bodily perfection by improving style.

Conclusion

³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans by A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) pp.61-62

The biggest problem is consumerism and greed. Until we all stop spending and striving for more and more possessions, and instead adopt a simpler life style, at the heart of which is family life, beauty companies and advertisements will become more and more prevalent. Women also need to stop being fed the line that older is not attractive and in some way not feminine. We should be allowed to grow old gracefully and be proud of the way we look. All the advertisements at present play on women's negative body image. If women feel good about themselves and are happy and secure, without having to resort to using potentially harmful products, then they will be creating a happier environment around them. This can only be good for the wellbeing of the ecosystems which life depends on. Naomi Woolf, in her book 'The Beauty Myth'⁴, sums this up perfectly.

'You could see the signs of female ageing as diseased...Or you could see that if woman is healthy she lives to grow old; as she thrives, she reacts and speaks and shows emotion, and grows into her face. Lines trace her thought and radiate from the corners of her eyes after decades of laughter, closing together like fans as she smiles. You could call the lines a network of 'serious lesions', or you could see that in a precise calligraphy, thought has etched marks of concentration between her brows, and drawn across her forehead the horizontal creases of surprise, delight, compassion and good talk. A lifetime of kissing, of speaking and weeping, shows expressively around a mouth scored like a leaf in motion. The skin loosens on her face and throat, giving her features a setting of sensual dignity; her features grow stronger as she does. She has looked around in her life, and it shows. When grey and white reflect in her hair, you could call it a dirty secret or you could call it silver or moonlight. Her body fills into itself, taking on gravity like a bather breasting water, growing generous with the rest of her. The darkening under her eyes, the weight of her lids, their minute cross-hatching, reveal that what she has been part of has left in her its complexity and richness. She is darker, stronger, looser, tougher, sexier. The maturing of a woman who has continued to grow is a beautiful thing to behold. Of, if your ad revenue...depend (s) on it, it is an operable condition.'

Naomi Woolf uses language here to resist the discourse of the beauty industry, responding to it instead by replacing it with a far more positive discourse of ageing.

⁴ Naomi Woolf, *The Beauty Myth*, (London, Random House Group, 2002)